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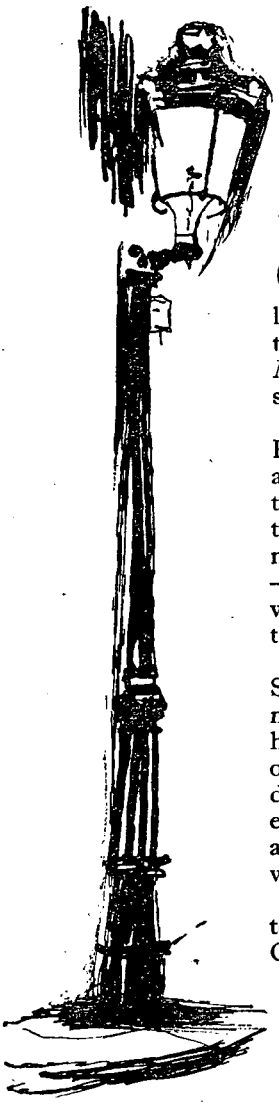

CHIEF Inspector Maigret—a household name to us all—is portrayed to the life by Rupert Davies in the current BBC television series. " C'est magnifique, c'est *Maigret !* "—this was from Simenon himself, the first time author and actor met.

Simenon continues to be entranced with Rupert Davies' portrayal. So closely are author, actor, and character now identified that each has become almost an extension of the other's personality. All three are happily married, smoke a pipe—Simenon has fifteen—find desk work intolerable, but people, wine, and food fascinating. A triumphant triumvirate.

Under the stern surveillance of Madame Simenon, no sound from the lovely château near Geneva is permitted to disturb her husband's concentration when he is at work on a new book. His study is inviolate. Ten days and many blunted pencils later he emerges red-eyed and at peace with yet another Maigret novel for his world-wide waiting public.

Sleuthing in Argosy, in action on television, wherever the Inspector goes, C'est magnifique, c'est Maigret !

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MAIGRET ON THE SEINE

DEAD MAN'S BARGE

BY GEORGES SIMENON

THE lock-keeper at Coudray was a thin, sad-looking chap, dressed in corduroys, with a drooping moustache and a suspicious eye, a type one often meets among bailiffs.

He made no distinction between Maigret and the fifty people—gendarmes, reporters, the detectives from Corbeil and the officials from the Public Prosecutor's office—to whom, for the last two days, he had been telling his story, and while he did so he kept watching, up and down river—the glaucous surface of the Seine.

It was November. It was cold, and a quite white sky—garishly white—was reflected in the water.

"I had got up at six in the morning to look after my wife," he said, and Maigret thought to himself how it was always these decent sad-looking men who have sick wives to take care of.

"Even as I was lighting the fire it seemed to me that I heard something. But it was later, while I was upstairs preparing the poultice, that I finally realised that someone was shouting. I went downstairs again. From the lock itself I made out a dark shape against the weir.

"'What is it?' I shouted. A hoarse voice replied with 'Help!'

"'What are you doing there?' I asked him.

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"He went on shouting, 'Help! Help!' So I got out my dinghy to go over. I saw it was the *Astrolabe*. As it was at last getting brighter, I was finally able to make out old Claessens on the deck. I'd swear he was still drunk, and knew no more than I did what the barge was doing on the weir. The dog was loose, even though I had asked him to keep it tied up. That's all."

What mattered for him was that a barge should have come and run aground on his weir, at the risk, if the current had been stronger, of smashing it. The fact that the only thing that was found on board—other than the drunken old stableman and a big sheepdog—was two hanging corpses, a man and a woman—that didn't concern him at all.

The *Astrolabe*, afloat again, was still there, about a hundred and fifty metres off, guarded by a gendarme who kept himself warm by marching up and down on the towpath. She was an old motorless barge—an écurie, or stable, as they call the boats that ply mainly on the canals, and keep their horses on board. Passing cyclists looked round at this greyish hull that all the newspapers had been full of for the last two days.

As usual when everyone else had failed to uncover anything new, it goes without saying that Chief Inspector Maigret was called in. Everyone concerned had been engaged on the inquiry, and the witnesses had already been interrogated fifty times, first by the gendarmerie, then by the Corbeil detectives, the magistrates, and the reporters.

"You'll find Emile Gradut did it!" everybody kept telling him.

And Maigret, who had just questioned Gradut for two hours, had come back to the scene of the crime, and stood there, hands in the pockets of his thick overcoat, looking surly, smoking his pipe in little short puffs, staring at the sullen landscape as if he wanted to buy a plot there.

The interest lay not in the Coudray lock where the barge had been stranded, but at the other end of the reach, eight kilometres upsteam at the Citanguette lock.

The same setting as down here, in short. The villages of Morsang and Seineport were on the opposite bank some distance away so that one saw only the quiet water fringed with trees and, here and there, the hollow of a disused sandpit.

But at Citanguette there was a bistro. The barges went to any lengths to lie there overnight. A real waterman's inn where they sold bread, tinned food, sausage, ropes, and oats for the horses.

It was there that Maigret really conducted his investigation,

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without seeming to, having a drink now and then, sitting by the stove, going for little strolls outside while the owner—a woman so fair she might almost have been an albino—watched him with respect tinged with irony.

This is what was known about the Wednesday evening.

Just as it was beginning to get dark, the *Eaglet VII*, a small tug from the upper Seine, had brought her six barges like chicks up to the Citanguette lock. At that time a fine rain was falling. When the boats had been moored, the men as usual had gathered at the bistro for a drink while the lock-keeper was putting away his gear.

The *Astrolabe* appeared at the bend only half an hour later when darkness had already fallen. Old Arthur Aerts, the skipper, was at the helm, while on the path Claessens walked ahead of his horses, his whip on his shoulder.

Then the *Astrolabe* moored at the end of the line, and Claessens had taken his horses aboard. At the time nobody at all was paying any attention to them.

It was after seven o'clock, and everybody had already finished eating, when Aerts and Claessens entered the bistro and sat down beside the stove. The skipper of the *Eaglet VII* was holding forth, and the two had no need to say anything. The flaxen-headed innkeeper, a baby in her arms, served them four or five cheap brandies without paying them much attention.

This, Maigret now understood, was the way of things here. They all knew one another, more or less. One entered with a casual greeting. One went and sat down without saying anything. Sometimes a woman came in, but it was to do her shopping for the next day, after which she would say to her husband, busy drinking, "Don't be too late coming back . . ."

It had been that way with Aerts' wife, Emma, who had bought bread, eggs, and a rabbit.

And from this moment onwards every detail became of the utmost importance, every piece of evidence was tremendously valuable. So Maigret was insistent. "You're sure that when he left, about ten o'clock, Arthur Aerts was drunk?"

"Blind drunk, as usual," the patronne answered. "He was a Belgian, after all. A good chap, really, who sat quietly in his corner and drank until he had only just enough strength to get back on board . . ."

"And Claessens, the stableman?"

"It took more than that to make him drunk. He stayed about another quarter of an hour, then he left, after coming back to look for his whip which he had forgotten."

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So far everything was going well. It was easy to picture the bank of the Seine, at night, below the lock, the tug at the head, the six lighters behind her; then the Aerts barge; on each boat a stable lantern and, falling over it all, a fine steady drizzle.

About half past nine, Emma arrived back on board with her shopping. At ten Aerts got back in his turn, blind drunk as the woman in the bistro had said. And at a quarter past ten the stableman finally made for the *Astrolabe*.

"I was only waiting for him to go to close up, for the watermen go to bed early, and there was no one else left."

So much for what was tangible and reliable.

From then on there was not a scrap of exact information. At six in the morning the skipper of the tug was amazed that the *Astrolabe* was no longer to be seen behind his lighters, and a few moments later he noticed that the mooring-lines had been cut.

Just then the Coudray lock-keeper, tending his wife, heard the shouts of the old stableman, and shortly afterwards found the barge grounded against his weir.

The dog on the deck was loose. The stableman, who had just been wakened by the impact, knew nothing, and claimed that he had been asleep all night with the horses as usual.

But, aft in the cabin, Aerts had been found hanged, not with a rope but with the dog's chain. Then, behind a curtain that screened off the washbasin, his wife Emma was found hanged—in her case with a sheet pulled off the bed.

And this was not all: when he was on the point of sailing, the skipper of the tug *Eaglet VII* called in vain for his engineer, Emile Gradut, and found he had disappeared.

"It was Gradut who did it." Everyone was agreed, and that evening the newspapers had headings like:

Gradut Seen Prowling near Seineport
Manhunt in the Forest of Rougeau
Aerts Savings Still Missing

For all the statements confirmed that old Aerts had a nest-egg, and everyone even agreed on the amount—one hundred thousand francs. Why? It was quite a story—or, rather, it was very simple. Aerts, who was sixty and had two grown-up sons, married, had taken Emma as his second wife; and Emma, a sturdy woman who came from Strasbourg, was only forty.

Now, things weren't going at all well with them. At every lock Emma complained about the meanness of the old man, who barely gave her enough to eat on.

"I don't even know where he keeps his money," she used to

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say. "He wants it to go to his sons if he should die . . . And *I* have to kill myself looking after him, steering the boat, to say nothing of . . ." She would go into cynical detail, to Aerts' face if need be, while Aerts stubbornly confined himself to shaking his head.

Only after she had gone he would murmur, "She only married me for my hundred thousand francs. But she'll be diddled."

Or Emma would say, "As if his sons needed it to live."

In fact, the elder, Joseph, was skipper of a tug in Antwerp, and Theodore, assisted by his father, had bought a fine motor launch, the *Marie-France*, which had just been contacted on its way to Maastricht in Holland.

"But I'll find them, his hundred thousand francs . . ." She would tell you this without thinking, even if she had known you for only five minutes, would give you the most intimate details about her old husband, and would conclude cynically, "All the same, he doesn't imagine it was for love that a young woman like me . . ."

And she was deceiving him. The evidence was indisputable. Even the skipper of the *Eaglet VII* knew all about it.

"I am only telling you what I know . . . But without a doubt during the fortnight we were lying idle at Alfortville, and while the *Astrolabe* was loading, Emile Gradut often used to go and see her, even in broad daylight."

So?

Emile Gradut, who was twenty-three, was a rat, that was clear. Actually, he had been arrested twenty-four hours later, starving in the forest of Rougeau less than five kilometres from Citanguette.

"I haven't done anything!" he screamed at the gendarmes as he tried to ward off the blows.

An unhealthy little lecher, repellent, whom Maigret had for two hours in his office, and who had repeated obstinately, "I haven't done anything . . ."

"Then why did you clear off?"

"That's my business!"

As for the examining magistrate, who was sure that Gradut had hidden the money in the forest, he had the place combed again, without result.

There was something infinitely dreary about all this, like the river, which reflected the same sky from morning to night, like the string of boats that announced their presence with hooters—one blast for each barge under tow, and which were endlessly edging their way in and out of the lock. Then, while the women

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on the deck, busying themselves with the kids, kept an eye on the barges, the men went up to the bistro, had a quick drink, and came back with heavy tread.

All crystal clear, one of his colleagues had said to Maigret. And yet Maigret, surly as the Seine itself, as a canal in the rain, had come back to his lock and couldn't tear himself away again.

It's always the same thing: when an affair appears to be clear nobody thinks of going deeper into the details. For everyone it was Gradut who had done it, and he looked so much the type who might that this in itself was taken as evidence.

Notwithstanding that, there were now the results of two post-mortems, which produced some strange conclusions. Thus, for Arthur Aerts, Dr. Paul said, "Slight contusion under chin . . . From the degree of rigor mortis and the contents of the stomach one can state that death by strangulation took place between ten and ten-thirty."

Now, Aerts had come back on board at ten. According to the albino-blonde patronne, Claessens had followed him a quarter of an hour later, and Claessens had stated that he had gone straight to bed.

Was the light on in the Aerts' cabin?

"I don't know."

Was the dog loose?

The poor old man had thought for a long time, only to end up with a helpless gesture. No, he didn't know . . . He hadn't noticed . . . Could he possibly have foreseen that his doings on that particular evening would have become of prime importance after the event? He was half-seas over. He was sleeping fully dressed on the straw, in the pungent odour of the horses.

"Didn't hear anything?"

He didn't know, he couldn't have known! He was asleep, and when he woke up he found himself in midstream, up against the weir.

There was another piece of evidence, but could it be relied on? It was by Madame Couturier, the wife of the skipper of *Eaglet VII*. The chief inspector at Corbeil had questioned her as well as the others before letting the convoy proceed on its way towards the Loing canal. Maigret had the transcript in his pocket.

Question: You heard nothing during the night?

Answer: I wouldn't like to swear that.

Q: Tell me what you heard.

A: It's so hazy . . . At one time I woke up and I looked at the time on the alarm clock. It was a quarter to eleven. It seemed to me that someone was talking near the boat.

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Q: You didn't recognise the voices?

A: No. But I thought it was Gradut having a rendezvous with Emma. I must have gone back to sleep straight away.

Could one rely on this? And, even if it were true, what did it prove?

Below the dam, a tug, its six barges and the *Astrolabe* had been moored for the night, and . . .

The report on Aerts was clear: he had died by strangulation between ten and ten-thirty. But the story grew complicated with the second of Dr. Paul's reports, the one that referred to Emma.

The right cheek bore traces of bruising caused either by a blunt instrument or by a violent blow from a fist. As to the time of death—caused by hanging—it must have been about one a.m.

And here was Maigret, sinking deeper and deeper into the slow, heavy way of life of Citanguette, as if it was only there that he could think. A motor launch flying Belgian colours made him think of Aerts' son, who must by now have arrived in Paris.

The Belgian colours made him think, too, of the gin. For, on the table in the cabin, a gin bottle had been found, more than half empty. The cabin itself had been ransacked from top to bottom: even the mattress had been ripped open, and the flock was spread all round. All this, of course, in a search for the savings. Those who had been first on the scene were saying, "It's all very simple. Emile Gradut killed Aerts and Emma. Then he got drunk and hunted for the money, and now he's got it hidden in the forest."

But there was one difficulty: Dr. Paul's post-mortem on Emma revealed that she had drunk all the gin that had gone from the bottle.

Well, so what? Then it was Emma who drank the gin, and not Gradut.

Perfectly clear, was the answer. Gradut, having killed Aerts, got his wife drunk so as to have the upper hand more easily—for you remember she was a strong woman.

If you believed that story, Gradut and his mistress had both stayed aboard from ten or half past, when Arthur Aerts died, until midnight or one in the morning, when Emma died . . .

It was possible, of course . . . Anything was possible. But Maigret wanted—it was hard to put into words—he wanted to come round to "thinking bargee," that's to say, to thinking as the barge folk did.

He had been quite as hard as the others on Gradut. For two hours he had kept grilling him. To begin with he had used

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the same old velvet-glove line, as they call it at Headquarters. "Now, listen to me, my boy, you're mixed up in this, that's obvious. But, frankly, I don't believe you killed them both."

"I didn't do anything!"

"All right, you didn't kill them. But own up, you pushed the old man round a bit. It was his own fault, after all—he disturbed you, so in self-defence you—"

"I didn't do anything!"

"As for Emma, of course you wouldn't have touched her, seeing she was your mistress."

"You're wasting your time—I didn't do anything!"

Then Maigret got tougher, even threatening. "Ah, so that's the way it is. Well, we'll see once you're on the boat with the corpses."

But Gradut had not flinched at the prospect of a reconstruction of the crime. "Whenever you like. I didn't do anything."

"Wait till they find the money you've got stowed away."

At that Emile Gradut had smiled, and it was such a pitying, superior smile . . .

That evening there were only two boats lying at Citanguette, a motor launch and an écurie. Below, at the weir, a gendarme stood sentry-go on the deck of the *Astrolabe*; he was very surprised when Maigret climbed aboard, saying, "I haven't time to go back to Paris. I'll sleep here."

You could hear the soft lapping of the water against the hull; then the gendarme, who was afraid of falling asleep, started marching up and down the deck. He, poor man, soon began to wonder if Maigret had gone mad, for he was making as much noise down there all by himself as if the horses had been let loose in the hold.

"Tell me, young man . . ." It was Maigret emerging from the hatchway. "You couldn't find me a pickaxe?"

Find a pickaxe, at ten at night, in a place like this! However, the gendarme woke the lock-keeper with the mournful look. And the lock-keeper had a pickaxe that he used in his garden.

"What's that Inspector of yours going to do with it?"

"I haven't the faintest . . ." And they exchanged meaningful looks.

As for Maigret, he went back to the cabin with his pickaxe, and for the next hour the gendarme heard muffled blows.

"Look, young man . . ."

It was Maigret again, sweating and puffing, who stuck his head through the hatch. "Go and make a phone call for me. I want the examining magistrate to come over first thing

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tomorrow morning, and he is to have Emile Gradut brought along . . ."

Never had the lock-keeper looked so lugubrious as when he piloted the magistrate towards the barge, while Gradut followed between two gendarmes. "No, I swear to you, I don't know anything . . ."

There was Maigret, fast asleep on Aerts' bed. He didn't even make any excuse; he gave the impression of not noticing the magistrate's amazement at the state of the cabin. The floor had, in fact, been torn up. Under this floor there was a layer of cement, but this had been shattered by great blows from a pickaxe; it was complete chaos.

"Come in, sir. I went to bed very late, and I haven't yet had time to tidy myself up." Maigret lit his pipe. Somewhere he had found some bottles of beer, and he poured himself a glass.

"Come in, Gradut. And now . . ."

"Yes," the magistrate said, "and now . . .?"

"It's very simple," Maigret said, sucking at his pipe. "I'm going to explain what happened the other night. You see, there's one thing that struck me from the start: old Aerts was hanged with a chain, and his wife was hanged with a sheet."

"I don't see—"

"You will. Look through all the police records and I swear you won't find one case—not one single one—of a man who hanged himself using a wire or a chain. It's strange, perhaps, but it's true. Suicides tend to be soft, more or less, and the idea of the links biting into their necks and pinching the skin . . ."

"So Arthur Aerts was murdered?"

"That's my conclusion, yes. Especially as the bruise on his chin seems to prove that the chain—which was thrown over his head from behind while he was drunk—first struck his face . . ."

"I don't see—"

"Wait! Next you should note that his wife, for her part, was found hanged with a twisted sheet from the bed. Not even a rope, though on board a boat there are plenty of them. No—a sheet from the bed, which is about the nicest way of hanging oneself, if I may put it like that."

"Which means what?"

"That she hanged herself. Obviously she did, because to give herself courage she had to swallow half a litre of gin—she who never drank at all. Remember the doctor's report."

"I remember."

"So, one murder and one suicide; the murder committed

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at about a quarter past ten, the suicide at midnight or one o'clock in the morning. From then on everything begins to get simple . . ."

The magistrate was looking at him with some distrust, Emile Gradut with ironic curiosity.

"For a long time now," Maigret continued, "Emma, who didn't get what she wanted by her marriage to old Aerts, and who was in love with Emile Gradut, had been haunted by one idea: to get hold of the old man's savings and go off with her lover.

"Suddenly she has the chance. Aerts comes home in a very drunken state. Gradut is only a step or two away, aboard the tug. She has seen, on going to make her purchases at the bistro, that her husband is already well on the way. So she unchains the dog and waits, with the chain all ready to slip round the old man's neck . . ."

"But—" the magistrate objected.

"All in good time. Let me finish. Now Aerts is dead . . . Emma, drunk with triumph, runs to get Gradut, and here don't forget that the tug-skipper's wife hears voices at a quarter to eleven. Is that right, Gradut?"

"That's right!"

"The two of them come back on board to look for the savings, search everywhere, even the mattress, and don't succeed in finding the famous hundred thousand francs. Is that right, Gradut?"

"That's right!"

"Time passes, and Gradut grows impatient. I bet he even starts wondering if he hasn't been hoaxed, wondering if the hundred thousand francs really exists. Emma swears it does. But what's the use of that, if it isn't discovered? They start searching again. Gradut has had enough. He knows he will be accused—*he wants to be off. Emma wants to go with him.*"

"Excuse me, but—" the magistrate murmured.

"Later! As I was saying, she wants to be off with him, and, as he has no wish to be encumbered with a woman who hasn't even any money, he gets out of it by punching her on the jaw. Then, once he's on shore, he cuts the mooring ropes of the barge. Is that right, Gradut?"

This time Gradut was slow to reply.

"That's almost all there is," Maigret concluded. "If they had discovered the money, they would have gone off together, or they would have tried to make the old man's death look like suicide. As they didn't find it, Gradut, scared out of his wits, roams around the countryside trying to hide.

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" As for Emma, she comes to to find the boat drifting on the current, and the corpse swinging beside her. No hope left. Not even a chance of getting away . . . Claessens would have to be wakened to pole the boat along . . . Everything's gone wrong. And she, in turn, decides to kill herself. Only, she hasn't enough courage, so she takes a drink, chooses a soft sheet from the bed . . ."

" Is that right, Gradut? " the magistrate asked, watching the wretch.

" Since the Inspector says so . . ."

" But, wait a moment . . ." the magistrate retorted, " what is there to prove that he didn't find the savings, and that, just to keep the money . . . ? "

At that Maigret merely stretched out a foot, and pushed away some pieces of cement, revealing a neat hiding-place containing Belgian and French gold coins. " Now you understand? "

" Almost," the magistrate murmured, without conviction.

And Maigret, refilling his pipe, grumbled, " One ought to have known in the first place that the bottoms of old barges are repaired with cement . . . Nobody told me that."

Then, with a sudden change of tone, " The best of it is that I've counted it, and it does in fact amount to one hundred thousand francs . . . Queer kind of couple, don't you think? "

La Péniche aux Deux Pendus © Georges Simenon
Argosy translation © Fleetway Publications Ltd. 1961

Translated by J. E. Malcolm

REMEMBERING FIREWORKS

Always as if for the first time we watch
The fireworks as if no one had ever
Done this before, made shapes, signs,
Cut diamonds on air, sent up stars
Nameless, imperious. And in the falling
Of fire, the spent rocket, there is a kind
Of nostalgia as normally only attaches
To things long known and lost. Such an absence,
Such emptiness of sky the fireworks leave
After their festival. We, fumbling
For words of love, remember the rockets,
The spinning wheels, the sudden diamonds,
And say with delight " Yes, like that, like that."
Oh and the air is full of falling
Stars surrendered. We search for a sign.

ELIZABETH JENNINGS

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BROOM DE MA TANTE

Being facetious will get you nowhere

BY E. L. MALPASS

GROUP Headquarters to Officer Commanding R.A.F. Station, Dinas 25/10/61. *Unidentified flying object reported in Snowdon area playing ducks and drakes with laws of aerodynamics. Investigate and report.*

Officer Commanding R.A.F. Station, Dinas to Group Headquarters 26/10/61. *Object identified by A.C.2 Waldo of this unit as his Aunt Blodwen on broomstick. If you want old lady intercepted, suggest you send fighter squadron.*

Group Headquarters to Officer Commanding R.A.F. Station, Dinas 26/10/61. *Being facetious will get you nowhere.*

Officer Commanding R.A.F. Station, Dinas to Group Headquarters 27/10/61. *Who's being facetious? It is, repeat is, Miss Waldo.*

Group Headquarters to Officer Commanding R.A.F. Station, Dinas 27/10/61. *Squadron Leader Renshaw, Psychiatric Branch, will report your unit immediately. You will give him all help and cooperation.*

A.C.2 Waldo knocked on the Station Commander's door, and entered. "Squadron Leader Renshaw," he announced.

"Ah yes. Show him in." Group Captain Ewan Llewelyn-Jones rose courteously. "Well, Renshaw. Come in. Sit down, man." He offered the Squadron Leader a cigarette. "Suppose you're giving the chaps a talk on psychopathology, or something?"

"No, sir." The Squadron Leader sat down. "It's this object I've come about, sir. Now I'm sure, and Group are sure, that you really do believe in this broomstick idea. But the human mind cannot always distinguish reality from . . ."

"You don't mean they think I'm seeing things!" The Group Captain looked very like a bull the moment before it begins its charge.

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But the psychiatrist was saved by a voice from the doorway. "*There's* my auntie now, sir," said A.C.2 Waldo, pointing out of the window.

The Squadron Leader looked. He looked again. Auntie was at two hundred feet, just coming in slowly to land, and he could see every detail.

"Satisfied?" inquired Llewelyn-Jones, nasty.

"But why a broomstick?" asked the Chief of Air Staff.

"They nipped about on them no end in the Middle Ages," said the Member for Personnel.

"This isn't the Middle Ages," snapped the Chief of Air Staff.

The rest of the Air Council kept their mouths shut. No good sticking your neck out when the old man was in this mood, they reflected.

The Chief of Air Staff gathered up his papers. "Well, it's got to be put a stop to before the press get it," he said. He stumped from the room. Broomsticks, indeed! As if he hadn't enough to worry about in his job without a lot of damn barrack stories . . .

The Group Captain put a kindly hand on Waldo's shoulder. "Look, Waldo, this aunt of yours. Got to put a stop to it, haven't we, now."

"Put a stop to it, sir?" Huw Waldo looked at his Commanding Officer in astonishment. "You mean her broomstick? But why, sir?"

"Orders, boy. Orders."

A kindly lad, that Waldo. Besides, Auntie had promised him five hundred pounds once he was safely married. No point in getting on the wrong side of the old lady. "But we can't, sir," he said. "It's her only recreation. A non-smoker, see, and a member of the Temperance. And very convenient it is for her shopping, and slipping up to see Gran Waldo at the farm."

"And it must stop."

Waldo looked at the gold braid on the other's cap. "What if it doesn't, sir?" he said bravely.

The Group Captain pursed his lips. "Hard to say, isn't it, Waldo? Might find yourself posted to Woomera, say." The friendly arm was still about his shoulder. "Thinking of getting married pretty soon, isn't it, boy? To A.C.W.2 Roberts?"

Huw swallowed. "Next month, sir."

"Ah well. You may still be here. Though surprising how soon they get these overseas postings through nowadays." He stuck his hands in his pockets, and strolled over to his desk. "Going to see your aunt tonight, is it?"

"Yes, sir." Huw was shaken. "I will do my best, sir."

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"I am sure you will, Waldo." But the Group Captain was already thumbing through the papers on his desk. "A pretty girl, that A.C.W.2 Roberts," he muttered thoughtfully. "Very friendly at one time with Sergeant Rhees, if I remember rightly. But don't worry, boy." He gave Waldo an understanding smile. "Sergeant Rhees is not one to take advantage of your prolonged absence."

Off like a shot Waldo was, as soon as he came off duty. Two years it had taken him to win Vanwy Roberts from the swaggering Rhees. And now everything was threatened. To Vanwy's mind, a sergeant on hand would be worth far more than an A.C.2 in the Australian Bush, any day. A sweet girl, Vanwy; tall and statuesque, with a Mona Lisa smile even when she'd got you down and was grinding her heel in your face. But not one to wait for any man . . .

Oh, but sad Miss Waldo was when her nephew brought the news. Such a very nice time she had been having since her discovery that she was a witch. But that had been only a month ago.

"I hope your milk turns sour," she had said to Davis the Dairy, during an argument. And that is just what it had done. That evening Gwladys and Buttercup, Myfanwy and Daisy Chain, and all their soft-eyed, sweet-smelling sisters had yielded nothing but pail after pail of sour milk. Not one sweet drop from the whole sweet sisterhood.

Angry, Davis the Dairy had been. Round to little Miss Waldo's, stamping and swearing; and her sweeping the leaves from her lawn with a besom. She heard him out. "You—you mean *I* turned your milk sour?" she asked incredulously.

"Who else?" he asked. He eyed the besom. "And I reckon you use that for more things than sweeping leaves," he said, cryptic.

"Well, there is surprising," mused Miss Waldo.

When he had gone, she too eyed the besom. No, it was too ridiculous. Still, there was no harm in trying. It would certainly save bus fares. She looked round to make sure no one was watching. Then, laughing at her own foolishness, she put the besom between her legs like a hobby horse.

"Hup, Jenny," she cried.

Two seconds later she was not only airborne. She was travelling at an estimated ground speed of forty miles an hour, skimming over the silver roofs of the little town, going temporarily into orbit round the gold cock on the church spire, toasting her toes in the heat from the factory chimneys; then up, up to where the sunlight lingered, and she saw the dust of evening lying

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thick on the valleys, and the lights coming on, one by one, in distant villages. Never had she been so exhilarated. Miss Waldo, who all her life had known nothing but a dark house in a small town, now soared like an eagle above the corries of the hills.

It was the most wonderful thing that had ever happened to her. In the weeks that followed she frequently took a vacuum flask and sandwiches, and remained airborne all day. And then, suddenly, the pale, anxious face of her nephew, imploring her to give it all up.

With nervous fingers she smoothed the black silk of her dress. She blinked back her tears. "Such fun it was, Huw," she said piteously.

"But dangerous," he said, "with all these aeroplanes about. Wouldn't like to get mashed up in the propellers, would you, or sucked into the jet and expelled in the form of a vapour trail?"

Auntie dabbed her eyes. Not one to buckle under to authority, usually. And desperate, now. "What if I say no?" she inquired.

"Sent to Australia, me," Huw said morosely.

"Botany Bay?" Aghast, the old lady was. "Oh, there is wicked."

"And before I can marry Vanwy," said Huw, following up his advantage.

Auntie Waldo said nothing. She rose, and went into the scullery. When she came back she was carrying her besom and an axe. She held them out to her nephew.

"Wanting a bit of kindling I am, this cold weather," she said. "And me no good with this old chopper. See what you can do for your old aunt, boy."

He looked at his aunt. He thought of Vanwy. He thought of Woomera. He thought of Sergeant Rhees.

"Very well, Auntie," he said. He set to work, and in five minutes the besom was nothing but a small pile of kindling. Huw left to go back to his unit; he could not meet her eye.

The weeks went by; and Auntie stayed grounded. A hundred times a day she would gaze up into the blue; and in her mind's eye she would dive on to the small cottonwool clouds, nearer, nearer, until the white cloud became a writhing, boiling mass of vapour, and into the blackness of it she would go, and then out again into the quick, clean sunlight. In her mind's eye she travelled once again the long straight highways of the sky. And the larks soared, mocking her, and the mute swans flew northward, carving the air with wings strong as oars, and the high-crawling aircraft dragged their golden pennants across the

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afterglow. Miss Waldo looked up from her little garden, and her heart rose with them. But her feet stayed firm on muddy earth.

Then hope came at last, fluttering down like a pretty butterfly on to the doormat, a card with silver bells and silver printing, very tasteful.

Mr. and Mrs. Roberts request the pleasure of Miss Waldo's company at the wedding of their daughter Vanwy to Mr. Huw Waldo at Bethel Methodist, etc. etc.

Miss Waldo put on her glasses and spelt it out, and her mind suddenly began to race forward. If Huw were married, they would hardly send him to Botany Bay. And even if they did—well, Auntie was beginning to feel that she had done her bit. Neither sight nor sound of her nephew in her house opposite Bethel since the day he had chopped her besom up for firewood.

Comes when he wants something, does Master Huw, she thought. So she would wait till he was married, and then see what a new besom from Howell the Hardware would do.

But here is her nephew in the dark little kitchen again, no happy bridegroom-to-be as you would expect, but anxious, eyes big and dark with worry. "Come to see if you can change people into toads, Auntie," he begins, no beating about the bush.

"Certainly not," says the old lady, shocked. "And never would I think of doing such a thing, even if I could."

"Got to do something about Sergeant Rhees," her nephew says ungraciously. "Threatening to stop my wedding, he is."

"Can't do that, can he now?"

"Says he will stand up in the middle of the ceremony and declare that I left a wife and six children in Singapore."

"Dangerous, that," Miss Waldo said thoughtfully. "Telling lies in chapel. Likely to be struck dead on the spot, if you ask me."

"But the damage would have been done," cried Huw, wringing his hands. "Cannot see Rev. Edwards proceeding with the ceremony once doubt has been sown in his mind."

Miss Waldo thought quickly. Her conscience, that ruled her with a rod of iron, had agreed that she could fly once Huw was safely married. But not before. And she longed desperately to fly again. Therefore nothing must interfere with Huw's wedding. She took off her glasses and polished them. Then she put them back on her nose. Her mind was made up.

"Leave it to me, good boy," she said briskly. And when her nephew had gone she sat down and wrote to say that Miss Waldo regretted that she was unable to accept Mr. and Mrs. Roberts' kind invitation. For there are some things you can decently do in chapel. And there are some things you can't.

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Eleven o'clock, the wedding was, and a bright crisp morning. At ten-thirty Miss Waldo took her seat in the window of her front parlour, overlooking Bethel. The room was cold. Miss Waldo had a travelling-rug and a muff.

She waited. First Huw arrived with the best man, and went inside, very solemn. Then the Rev. Edwards, tall and thin. A scattering of guests. No sign yet of Sergeant Rhees.

More guests. Nearly eleven o'clock now, and Miss Waldo gripping something tightly in her muff, hoping, praying that Sergeant Rhees would come to the wedding; for she was of an eager and inquiring turn of mind, and was looking forward to her little experiment.

More guests. Then, at last, the bride, very beautiful, still smiling like the Mona Lisa—or like a nice pussy just about to pounce. In she went on her father's arm, and Miss Waldo heard the far, faint clatter of Evans Organblower cranking up for the Bridal March.

Still no Sergeant Rhees. Very disappointed, Miss Waldo was. The fingers in her muff relaxed their grip.

But at that moment she heard another sound. Firm, quick footsteps. And into the street came Sergeant Rhees, all six lean feet of him. Two at a time he went up the steps of Bethel, paused for a moment to twirl his great moustache and throw away his cigarette, and then he pushed open the door and marched inside, letting out a quick slice of Bridal March.

And Miss Waldo, who had cast herself for the role of Fate, knew that it was time for her to play her part. And she was far from unwilling. The sight of the great arrogant creature on his way to stop her nephew's wedding and, through that, her flying, filled her with resentment. With firm fingers she drew the thin wax effigy from her muff. She groped in the workbag that lay beside her chair, and produced a meat skewer. Viciously she drove the skewer into the tiny creature's abdomen.

"Got you," said Miss Waldo with immense satisfaction.

Not a sound now from the little chapel. Miss Waldo waited. She did not wait long. Very soon the door of the chapel was flung open, and out came the bride's father. For a moment he looked this way and that helplessly. Then down the steps and legging it towards the doctor's.

Miss Waldo opened her window and leaned out. "Someone taken ill, is it?" she inquired solicitously.

Stopped in his tracks, did Mr. Roberts. "Yes," he said, "the Rev. Edwards. Seized with stomach cramps. Very excruciating."

"The Rev. Edwards?" Miss Waldo hid her dismay. "Had —had he performed the ceremony?"

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" No, indeed. Only just got the participants fallen in, as you might say." And he raised his hat, and disappeared on his errand of mercy.

Well, there was a terrible miscarriage of witchcraft. And such a to-do there was, with the doctor bustling in, and the Rev. Edwards borne out on a stretcher, groaning, and Vanwy still smiling her secret smile, and Sergeant Rhees smug as you please, and Huw coming straight across and banging on his aunt's door, anger in every step.

Very uncooperative, Miss Waldo felt, as she went to open the door.

" Come in, then," she said grimly.

Huw came in. Stood in the hall, hands on hips, glaring. " What happened? " he barked.

" Pity, the Sergeant and the Minister being both about the same build," Miss Waldo said. " Leads inevitably to confusion."

" And what are you going to do about it? " shouted her nephew.

" Come into the parlour, Huw," she said. " And I will tell you."

They went into the parlour. " I will tell you what I am going to do, Huw," she said. " I am going to buy another besom and take to the air. And I am going to leave what money I have to Bethel, in restitution of the cruel wrong I have done the Rev. Edwards."

White to the lips, Huw was. " And what about me? " he cried. But his aunt was busy removing the skewer from the Rev. Edwards' abdomen, and did not seem to hear.

A sad disappointment awaited her, however, when she called on Howell the Hardware. " Besoms? " he said. " Out of date, girl." And he produced a bright yellow broom. " This is what you want," he said. " All plastic, with nylon bristles. Sweeps a treat."

" But I wanted a besom," said Miss Waldo, her heart sinking.

Howell shook his head. Sadly Miss Waldo left the shop. She tried others. There was not a besom in all Dinas.

Gran Waldo will have one, the old lady thought. She strode off to the farm, and sure enough there was a besom propped up in the yard.

Very pleased to see her, Gran was. So she stayed for tea, and when she left the dusk was falling. But enough light to see that the besom was still there.

" Lend me your besom, Gran," she said lightly.

" What for? Flying, is it? " cackled Gran, very humorous.

" That is right," said Miss Waldo.

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She picked up the besom, straddled it, and cried, "Hup."

Nothing happened. Gran was watching, her mouth disapproving. "Be your age, good girl," she said coldly.

The two old ladies looked at each other. "Good night, Gran," said Miss Waldo. She set off down the darkling lanes, tired and bitter. So any old besom would not do. There was only one, and she had let her selfish nephew chop it into little pieces.

By now she was passing Dinas Wood. Very sombre it was, as sombre as her thoughts. So her flying days were over, sacrificed to an ungrateful nephew. Almost she wished that she had never known the ecstasy of flight.

An owl came winging from the wood on silent confident wings. Miss Waldo watched him enviously. "Wish I was an owl," she muttered.

"Well, there is sudden," said Miss Waldo, perched in an oak tree. She spread her wings delightedly, and peered about her with great round eyes. There was so much to see; all the tiny creatures of the forest about their business. And so much to hear. She heard the shrill chatter of young mice, and the burrowing mole, and the worms dragging themselves through the wet earth. She heard something else, an arch female voice.

"Huw, darling, how untidy you are! I am going to change you when we're married, you know. You won't mind, will you?"

"I shall like it, darling," said the fool.

Miss Waldo could see them now, strolling through the woods, a fair head resting on a puny shoulder.

"And we shan't have to visit your old aunt in that dreadful dark house of hers, darling?" cooed Vanwy.

"We shan't have to visit her at *all*," said Huw. "Cut me off with a shilling, she has."

They stopped, sudden. "But—but that means we can't get married. You don't expect me to marry on an A.C.2's pay! A Sergeant's—" Her voice rose, making the night hideous.

"Oh, tu whit, tu whoo," Miss Waldo screeched rudely. She was tired of all this. Time to try her new wings. She leaned forward on her bough, gave herself to the air, and flew with quick, joyous strokes through the welcoming forest.

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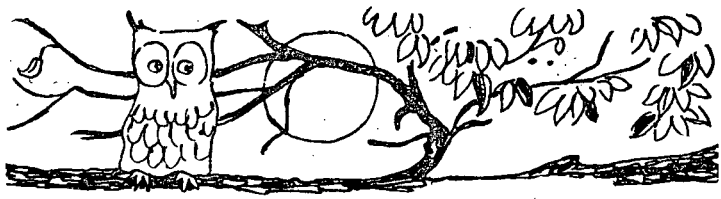

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GHOST OF THE SAN PEDRO

The mine resounded with a sudden bedlam of screeching, cackling, and gibbering

BY J. C. WILLIAMSON

THE San Pedro Mine is about six miles inside the Mexican border, the nearest town being the little mud village of Boquillas. This is on the Mexican side of the Rio Grande, where the river turns north-east to form the Big Bend—a feature that gives its name to the entire rugged country.

In June 1915, a ragged band of unwashed hombres, calling themselves Pancho Villa's men, came out of the cactus and occupied the town. Here the Americans, owners and operators of the mine, had built a small smelter and a tramway across the river by which cinnabar, a mercury ore, was carried into the United States.

A request for a sizeable sum of "protection" money was turned down by the Americans, who stood on the high cliffs across the river and shouted threats of American troop invasion if the property was damaged. This seemed to disturb the boys in the village; they held a hurried conference in the street with much arm-waving.

A large Mexican, wearing a bright red military jacket and no shoes, rushed excitedly out of a group on the bank and fired his rifle at the Americans perched on the cliff across the river. The bullet whined harmlessly off the limestone rocks, but the Americans snatched .45s and a Winchester rifle. In several minutes Boquillas was deserted; several large hats floated in the dust of the street.

Pancho's men burnt the mine that night and moved off into the purple mountains. Because of bad border conditions during the First World War, the damage was not repaired. San Pedro Mine was not reopened.

Some time around 1926 a lone Mexican, Juan Marquis, moved his two-wheel wagon and two burros on to the low round ridge into which the vertical shaft of the mine had been dug. He lived on the ridge for years, sleeping under the wagon and cooking

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over a fire kindled from the charred timbers of the mine. He constructed a long rope ladder into the shaft and brought out high-grade ore in a sack over his back attached to a wide band across his forehead. A small rock furnace served as a crude smelter. Afterwards he collected the heavy mineral into iron bottles, strapped them on his burros, crossed the river at night, and after a long trek across the Big Bend canyons and mountains, sold his mercury to the American mine operators at Terlingua.

When he made these long treks, he would bring his goats and chickens into the now nearly deserted Boquillas to be tended. The fat white hens and proud rooster were a source of wonder to the children who had seen only the scrawny, scrubby ones that picked in the gravel of the streets or searched for insects among the yucca plants of the hillside.

There were whispers in the very lean years of 1931 and 1932 that probably Marquis had made much money. He had flour and lard and good shoes; he also had his hair cut by a barber every three or four months at Terlingua. There was some speculation as to where Juan Marquis kept his money.

In late 1932, Juan Marquis disappeared. The small rounded hill was bare. Wagon, goats, burros, chickens were gone, even the small rock furnace had been broken and scattered.

The years went by. Parts of the charred framing still clung to the sides of the open shaft. Looking far down into the hole, one could see what appeared to be a white cloud. It floated up from the depths and burnt away quickly in the dry air.

Looking down one day, a boy goatherd rolled a large rock into the shaft and listened for it to strike bottom. A terrible scream issued from the hole. It sent him scurrying from the hill to his home. Other rocks tossed into the shaft produced nothing but the clatter on the walls or the dull contact with the bottom.

One man allowed himself to be lowered by one of the rusty cables that lay along the hillside. Urgent vibrations of the cable and frightened shouts arose soon after he had disappeared into the white vapour, and the others quickly pulled him back up.

He had been near the bottom, he thought, when he had been screamed at. Something chuckled close to his ear and zoomed into the tunnel of the mine, letting out squalls that resounded along the rock wall. He could see nothing. Everything was white before his eyes; creeping things seemed to come at him from everywhere.

He would not go back. The ghosts were well established in San Pedro Mine.

But another casualty of World War II was the San Pedro

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ghost. When the Japanese dropped the bombs on Pearl Harbour, they also blasted the screaming ghost from the tunnels and charred ruins of the San Pedro mine. The price of minerals began a steady climb, mercury included.

In June of 1942, a tall man with a big hat and a catlike walk came into my office. He introduced himself as Jim Ferrell of the Texas Rangers Service on temporary leave of absence. He wanted geological advice on the San Pedro Mine. He had old assays and old samples; his father had been an original stockholder and one of the men who had stood on the cliffs and shouted threats to Pancho Villa's men.

We talked a long time about mining, of which I knew very little. But I did know good cinnabar and something about the deposits in the Big Bend country. I asked for new samples. He had none. I suggested that some be brought out from the mine.

"I've been to the location," he said. "I had intended to bring out a good deal of fresh rock, but I couldn't get anyone in the vicinity to assist, even to the extent of building ladders or helping from the surface. It's a haunted mine," he grinned.

I didn't know. "Well, good," I said. "Maybe we can get the ghost to dig rock if we can get down there."

"You will go then," he said quickly.

I said that I would go for the regular fee for petroleum geological work; that fee was a hundred dollars a day plus expenses. He agreed. I thought he was a little too agreeable.

"You will go along also, I presume."

"Yes, I'll go," he said, "but I can't promise any other assistance."

"I don't imagine you put much faith in ghosts," I laughed.

"No. Not any," he said. "I'll confess I would rather have them above ground, though. I'll pick you up tomorrow," he promised as he was leaving.

We were over the Pecos River before dawn and saw the sun come up over the Sierra del Modera. We breakfasted at Marathon, then turned south for a hundred miles through the Big Bend rocky hills and dry arroyos, century plants, and yucca. It was May, and the pink cacti and white clusters of the yucca spread a dainty perfume over the region. Before us were the blue mountains of Mexico. In the morning sun, their loftiness was exaggerated.

We came to the Rio Grande and a ranch headquarters that sat squarely on the river's banks. It was noon and we were invited to dinner. The large plaster Spanish-style ranch-house was on a ledge some fifty feet above the river channel.

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The ranch owner knew Jim Ferrell. I was introduced to Daniel Sanders. While they talked of cattle, I stood on the cane-covered porch and gazed into the blue mystery of the Mexico mountains. The sky was a dazzling azure blue, without a cloud. Everything shimmered under the direct attention of the radiant south-western midday sun. The river below gleamed and sparkled.

The car had to be left at the ranch. The three of us climbed the cliffs over the river until we stood opposite the village. Thirteen or more mud huts slumped under the heat. No one was in view. Even the burros had sought the shade of an adobe wall. Below, the river was swift, narrow, and deep. It aimed like a steel spear into the purple mouth of the canyon. Across the river on the bank were large heaps of slag, remnants of the ruined smelting works.

Sanders put his hands to his mouth and shouted across the river, "Caballos!"

A man came sleepily from a hut and gazed across to the cliffs. Soon he came out of a cane shed leading a small bay pony. He rode slowly across the sand and gravel to the river channel. He was followed by a thin brown dog.

"He keeps the pony saddled most all the time," grinned Sanders.

The man, pony, and dog came to the water. The horse began slowly and carefully to pick his way across the channel. The dog scurried several yards upstream and plunged in. He swam furiously. The current swept him along swiftly past the horse.

We scrambled down the rocks and came out on a sandy bar as horse and dog emerged from the water. We gave the Mexican our equipment which he, dog, and horse began to ford over to Mexico.

The water came up to our waists. It was cold and hard going; the current sucked and pulled at our legs.

In the blazing sun, we filed down the gravelled streets of the village. Dirty women and children peered out of low adobe huts. Their matted black hair hung low over their foreheads. Scrawny chickens, with sunburnt heads, lay on their sides in the shadows of the walls and panted for cooler air. Burros slumbered; a pig of doubtful age and lineage came into the middle of the street. After looking us over for a possible handout he trotted away.

We wound our way from the silent huts into the yucca and juniper. Stately cactus plants with pink blooms crowned the ridges. Lizards lay on the rocks and squinted as we passed.

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Three miles out, after we had climbed several hundred feet above the river channel, we came upon a low rounded knoll. Numerous pieces of rusty machinery and half-burnt cables lay about.

In the centre of the clearing we came to a rocky hole, perhaps ten feet across. We stood upon the edge and looked down. The position of the sun allowed light to penetrate far down on the rugged sides. Cobwebs rounded out the corners covered with the dust of years. No sign of disturbance showed upon the rocks of the pit or the plants that clung to the crevices and hung timidly outwards. Far below was a faint green tinge along the side of the darkness, and out of the darkness occasional little whiffs of white vapour floated upwards to vanish quickly into the dry air.

"Well," Jim said, "this is the San Pedro." He got to his knees and looked into the hole. The Mexican had dumped the equipment and stood way back, holding the reins of the horse nervously. Ferrell took a piece of flat limestone and tossed it into the shaft.

"Wake up them ghosts," he grinned.

Then he gasped with surprise. A series of shrill screams and squalls burst from the depths of the shaft and bounded upwards from its rocky throat. For a few seconds, these sounds, echoing and re-echoing, filled the air around us. Then they gradually died away.

I felt a tingling creep up my spine and tickle my neck.

Ferrell stood up. "I'll be damned," he said flatly. Sanders was silent. The Mexican uttered a few words in Spanish. He hurriedly mounted and started back to the village.

Under the bright blazing mid-afternoon sun there was fear.

I said quickly, a little too quickly, "Let's get the ladder down and get on with this."

Ferrell, still looking into the shaft, pitched in another stone without any effect.

"Damnedest sound I ever heard," he drawled. "Sounds like you had thrown your hat into the hen yard." He began dragging up the rope ladder and lowering it into the shaft.

"Damn that Mex," Ferrell said. "We'll have to get him back up here with the horse to unpack the equipment and the assays."

The rope ladder was lowered until we could not see its end. We secured it to a cable which in turn was attached to a "dead man" cemented into the rock of the hill by the engineer who had built the mine at the beginning of the century.

Sanders said that he would wait at the top. He produced a

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small .32 automatic from his hip pocket and offered it to me. Ferrell was already scrambling down the ropes.

"We need a gun, Jim?" I asked.

"Hell, I don't see what for. There sure hasn't been anything going down here in a long time." He looked up, grinning. But I took the gun and put it into my pocket and started down.

Ferrell knew that the shaft was about a hundred and twenty feet to bottom, and then tunnels went out at fairly steep gradients in different directions. There were various dugouts and irregularities. The best ore was supposed to be near the end of the big main tunnel. These facts he had learnt from his father.

About eighty feet down we were engulfed by the white vapour. I could scarcely see Ferrell only ten feet below me, and within a few feet he disappeared completely. The white cloud churned up and down with the currents that developed when the dry cooler air of the shaft met the damp hot steam-laden air from the mine. There was constant precipitation. We were wet and the rocks on the sides were dripping. A brilliant green moss clung to everything. It was this growth that produced the green tint that we had seen from above.

A sudden surging of the vapour covered me completely. Its thickness obscured even my hand on the ropes before my eyes. The whiteness was dazzling. I opened my eyes wide. I could see nothing but white. Droplets of water collected on my eyebrows and eyelashes. The atmosphere was warm, and hot perspiration trickled down my face and back.

I felt my way along the ladder. My eyes seemed to pop out in an effort to penetrate the vapour. I felt Ferrell's hat under my feet and knew he had stopped.

"I can't see a damn thing," he said, and his voice was not reassuring. "Something is crawling around on me."

Almost immediately I had the same sensation of something with tickly feet crossing my face, my hands, my neck. With one hand holding the ropes, I swatted vigorously with the other. Something soft and fat squashed between my fingers. There were many creatures; presently they were clinging to my hat, tugging slightly at my nostrils and lips and the backs of my hands. I snorted and blew. I could hear Ferrell snorting, too, and felt vigorous action below.

I blew out fiercely to dislodge something from my lip. The clear air from my lungs for a brief second created a pocket of visibility. I saw the creatures: large and fat and soft, with long delicate tentacles and legs. They were crickets or grasshoppers of a species that inhabit damp storm cellars: colourless insects with bulging stomachs and bulging eyes.

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My hands trembled as I brushed them from my face. I could scarcely suppress profanity, but at the same time I could hardly suppress a giggle. Ferrell was oscillating furiously beneath me, shaking the ladder, and beating my feet.

"What's the matter, Jim?" I asked.

"What the hell's crawling?" It was in his voice. I had a secret feeling of being avenged. We were on an equal basis now.

"Can't you see them?" I said, pushing my victory a little.

"Hell, I can't see, can you?" he almost screamed.

"Sure, man; go on down, they're crickets."

His voice trembled a bit. "I'm alive with them and I can't see a damn thing. I've lost my hat."

My seconds of triumph were short indeed. From below a long unearthly scream arose. Its echoes returned again and again to fill the mine with confused noises. I felt again the existence of fear. I could scarcely stop myself from scrambling straight up out of the mine.

I could feel Ferrell moving down. After a brief hesitation, I followed.

Quite suddenly, as if motivated by a given signal, the crickets were gone. I felt them flick away from my skin and clothes, like grasshoppers leaving a field.

"Have the bugs left you?" I heard Ferrell from below.

"They sure have," I answered. "But what is that smell?"

We had passed into a zone charged with the pungent acid smell of rotting. It was the heavy smell of fertiliser. I felt the walls. They were bare and smooth, though still wet.

We were at the bottom and standing shoulder to shoulder on a firmly-packed heap of debris that had fallen into the shaft. I had expected mud. We were on a mound of wet soil, but our heels did not sink in.

The vapour thinned a little and the ranger was partly visible. There was less light and less whiteness, but we could see only a few feet. The heat increased and the stench was stifling. We felt our way along. The debris had built up until we had to stoop to enter the tunnel.

"These sons-of-guns sure smell like ghosts," Ferrell remarked. He took a big torch from his belt and pointed it along the tunnel. The steam diffused the light and we could see even less, but the brightness was a signal for a sudden bedlam of screeching, cackling, and gibbering.

The mine resounded again.

Ferrell moved forward. I couldn't see his features.

"What is this, Jim?" I asked.

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"It's got me. There sure hasn't been anything down that shaft in years. If only I could see."

We moved forward again, still in the fog of the vapour. It was steep for several feet. Some object stood in our path. We struck it first with our feet.

Ferrell flashed the light again and it seemed to be an object of considerable size.

Just then something large and white sprang up before us, and the same sound as before burst into our ears at close range. It was gone in seconds.

I cannot readily explain the emotions that were taking possession of my senses. I found it difficult to move forward, or to move at all, for that matter. My mouth was dry in spite of the moisture that soaked our bodies.

Unconsciously I had drawn the small gun. Feeling my legs getting weak, I reached out and put my hand on Ferrell's shoulder. He let out a hoarse throaty yell. His muscles were as taut as steel.

He leapt forward when I touched him and collided with the object before us. We felt it with our hands. It was wood, but my groping fingers came in contact with something smooth, round and very warm.

I picked it up and knew that it was a warm smooth human skull. My fingers felt the empty eye sockets and the loose hanging jawbones with the teeth.

I thrust the object away from me squarely into the bulging eyes of Ferrell.

Neither of us knew who broke first, but I remember his hoarse, "Awk." Then we ran for the ladder in the shaft. Our shoulders bumped and I fell and struck the rock floor.

Some time must have elapsed before I came to. I lay for a while before opening my eyes. My head buzzed from a lump over my temple. I was lying in warm soft stinking mud. I found myself on my back at the bottom of a large round hole, perhaps fifteen feet across and five or six feet deep. Above was the white steam cloud, but in the hole the heavy cool air was clear.

At the edge of the hole, standing beneath the vapour, staring down at me with first one big eye and then the other, was an enormous white hen.

I knew then that the San Pedro ghost had been exposed.

Ferrell was coming back along the tunnel, anxiously calling my name. I felt the automatic in my hand and pointed it at the chicken's head and fired.

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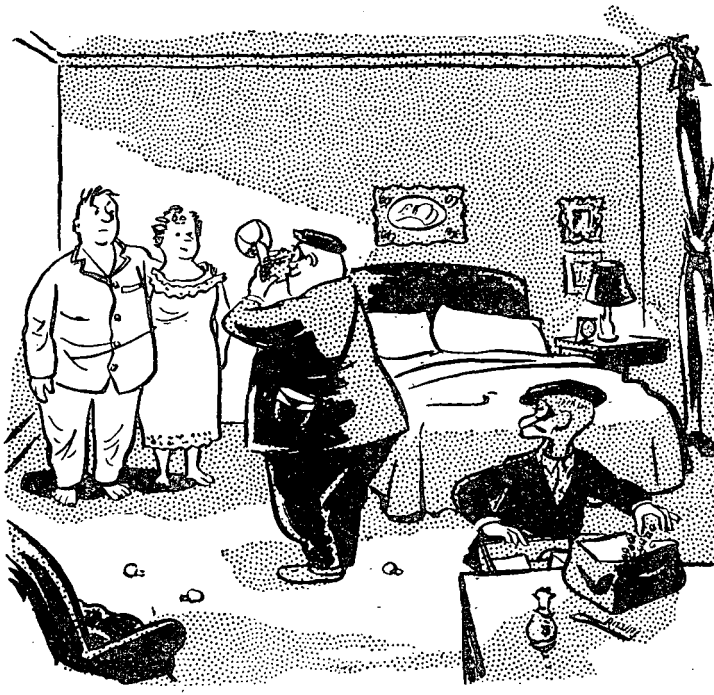
Juan Marquis' chickens! The skull was undoubtedly his. The object on the floor of the tunnel was his battered wagon with the broken chicken coop still clinging to its side. His skeleton was lashed with a rope to a wheel.

Apparently we had disturbed a hen sitting comfortably on the skull. We assumed he had been tortured and murdered for his money. The wagon, chickens, and everything had been shoved into the shaft.

The chickens had thrived, and even raised young ones, on the crickets from the shaft.

The Mexican with the horse grinned broadly when we showed him the white hen and told him about the crickets. "When I was a boy," Sanders interpreted him, "I used to wonder what Juan fed them on to keep them so fat." © J. C. Williamson 1961

Butch the Burglar



"He has been a real nuisance since he got himself a camera and a projector."

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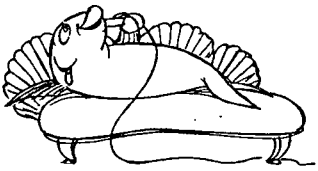
Flipperwise



How doth the little crocodile
Improve his shining tail . . .

LEWIS CARROLL

Said the Shark to the Flying-Fish over the phone:
" Will you join me to-night? I am dining alone.
Let me order a nice little dinner for two!
And come as you are, in your shimmering blue."

Said the Flying-Fish: " Fancy remembering me,
And the dress that I wore at the Porpoises' tea!"
" How could I forget?" said the Shark in his guile:
" I expect you at eight!" and rang off with a smile.

She has powdered her nose; she has put on her things;
She is off with one flap of her luminous wings.
O little one, lovely, light-hearted and vain,
The Moon will not shine on your beauty again!

E. V. RIEU, *The Flattered Flying-Fish*

Otter and Colder

I fashioned a collar, or rather a body-belt for him, and took him on a lead to the bathroom, where for a half an hour he went wild with joy in the water, plunging and rolling, shooting up and down the length of the bath under water and making enough slosh and splash for a hippo. This, I was to learn, is a characteristic of otters; every drop of water must be, so to speak, extended and spread about the place; a bowl must at once be overturned, or, if it will not overturn, be sat in and sploshed in until it overflows. Water must be kept on the move and made to do things; when static, it is as wasted and provoking as a buried talent.

It was only two days later that he escaped from my bedroom as I entered it and I turned to see his tail disappearing round the bend of the corridor that led to the bathroom. By the time I had

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caught up with him he was up on the end of the bath and fumbling at the chromium taps with his paws. I watched, amazed by this early exhibition of an intelligence I had not yet guessed; in less than a minute he had turned the tap far enough to produce a dribble of water, and, after a moment or two of distraction at his success, achieved the full flow. (He had, in fact, been fortunate to turn the tap the right way; on subsequent occasions he would as often as not try with great violence to screw it up still tighter, chittering with irritation and disappointment at its failure to co-operate.)

GAVIN MAXWELL, *Ring of Bright Water*

Sea-Thing Trouble

" But that was nothing to what things came out
From the sea-caves of Criccieth yonder."
" What were they? Mermaids? dragons? ghosts? "
" Nothing at all of any things like that."
" What were they, then? "
" All sorts of queer things,
Things never seen or heard or written about,
Very strange, un-Welsh, utterly peculiar
Things. Oh, solid enough they seemed to touch,
Had anyone dared it. Marvellous creation,
All various shapes and sizes and no sizes,
All new, each perfectly unlike his neighbour,
Though all came moving slowly out together."
" Describe just one of them."
" I am unable."
. . . " But at last
The most odd, indescribable, thing of all,
Which hardly one man there could see for wonder
Did recognisably a something."
" Well, what? "
" It made a noise."
" A frightening noise? "
" No, no."
" A musical noise? A noise of scuffling? "
" No, but a very loud respectable noise . . ."

ROBERT GRAVES, *Welsh Incident*

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Merry Old Sole

There lived a happy coelacanth
In dim primordial seas,
He ate and mated, hunted, slept,
Completely at his ease.
Dame Nature urged: "Evolve!"
He said: "Excuse me, Ma'am,
You get on making Darwin,
I'm staying as I am."

HORACE SHIPP, *The Coelacanth*

Tentacle Tactics

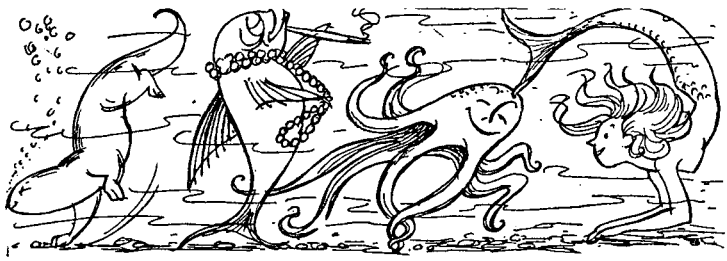
I do not suppose it is really true that the eyes of an octopus shine in the dark; besides, it was clear daylight only six feet down in the limpid water; but I could have sworn the brute's eyes burned at me as I turned in towards his cranny. That dark glow—whatever may have been its origin—was the last thing I saw as I blacked out with my left hand and rose into his clutches. Then, I remember chiefly a dreadful sliminess with a herculean power behind it. Something whipped round my left forearm and the back of my neck, binding the two together. In the same flash, another something slapped itself high on my forehead, and I felt it crawling down inside the back of my singlet . . . In most emergencies the mind works with crystal-clear impersonality. This was not even an emergency, for I knew myself perfectly safe. But my boyhood's nightmare was upon me. I forgot there was anyone to save me.

ARTHUR GRIMBLE, *A Pattern of Islands*

Cephalo-feeling

Tell me, O Octopus, I begs,
Is those things arms or is they legs?
I marvel at thee, Octopus;
If I were thou, I'd call me Us.

OGDEN NASH, *The Octopus*



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RAZOR'S EDGE

I sat in the seat of execution.
Why all the fuss?

BY WALLACE CRAWFORD

THE man sitting in the opposite corner of the barber's shop, with his back to the window, seemed to be regarding me rather severely. With his long black cloak and his wide black hat, which he had declined to remove presumably because the sun was on the back of his head, he looked a chancy character at best. Possibly a member of the Mafia?

"I loved that woman with all my heart," declared the barber. "With every fibre of my being!" His being, which was large and probably powerful, but running to fat, quivered sensibly as he lashed great dobs of lather on the bristly chin submitted to his ministrations. He was departing from the usual custom of barbers by telling the tale not to the immediate victim, but to the one next on the waiting list. That was me.

"But there! Everybody in the town loved her. Her figure! Mama Mia!" Making an effort to describe a figure of eight, he waved the shaving brush, and a dollop of lather flew to the looking-glass. "When she walked down the street, all eyes followed her little backside."

My own eyes wandered uneasily to the blinding sunshine outside. I had got used to these confidences, and they usually lasted an unconscionable time. I wondered if I would be able to get in a drink before luncheon at the Bar Cinquecento.

"She was sixteen when I first saw her. Well, I had seen her before, but not noticed her. You understand me?" He applied forefinger and thumb to the chin beneath him and massaged mercilessly. He talked as he massaged. "There will never be anyone like her. Never another woman for me."

He gave me a hot glare, as if daring me to deny the truth of this assertion. I did not deny, but I could not help recalling the black-eyed, personable wench I had seen preparing coffee at the back of the shop a few minutes before.

"Of course, her father had no money. But that didn't matter. I wanted her. I knew at once she was the one woman for me. I loved her. I loved every part of her." With his free hand, he

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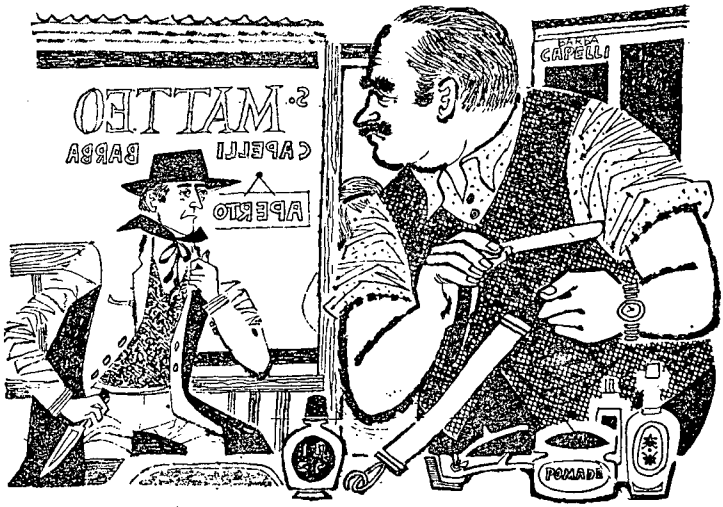

made motions indicative of the parts he most affected. " And her eyes! Like the stars round the Madonna! And her lips! Like crushed grapes! You should have seen."

I stirred in my seat, which was hard and probably dated back to the days when Garibaldi occupied the town. I had promised to have dinner in Naples that evening, and I was thirty miles from Naples. On the other hand, there was a certain vividness in his style which I began to find compelling.

Hardly conscious of his customer, the barber fixed me with a passionate eye which made all ancient mariners seem cold and colourless.

" I made sure of her," he remarked grimly. Then he chuckled, and the man under him winced as the merciless fingers tightened on his chin.

" I made sure of her," the barber repeated, and he shot me a wink which was lavish, loquacious, and distinctly lewd. " You understand me? I went to the priest and I told him, and he married us without any argument.

"Nobody dared to argue anyway. I was very strong in those days. Very strong."

He gave the chin an extra vicious pinch. I sensed, rather than saw, tears in the eyes of the victim.

The man by the window leaned forward and pushed his wide black hat to the back of his head. He shifted his persistent,

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menacing gaze from me to the barber. As he leaned forward he thrust back his cloak and his hand went to his waist. Under the hand I could see the hilt of a knife gleaming dully in the shadow of his black, dangerous frame. But clearly he was no longer interested in me, the foreigner. All his attention was concentrated on the barber.

"Unfortunately, the baby died. I suppose it made a difference." The barber shrugged massive shoulders. "But we were happy. Of course we were happy! A man like me, with my experience, and a girl like her, with her . . . then this other man came along."

He wiped his hands on the towel and took up the brush again. He slapped it round the customer's ears, under his nose. The face under the lather was still, almost featureless, but intent. The customer also was listening to the barber's tale.

"It was just before the war. The circus came here. It came here every year, and they used to pitch it on the sports ground behind the Town Hall. Annalina, my wife, she was still a child in some ways. She loved the circus.

"The first year we were married, she didn't bother about it. She had the baby. But the second year, the baby was dead; and I couldn't refuse. But I refused her nothing. She had a wonderful time with me. We used to go to Napoli once a month, and in the summer we went to Capri, Amalfi, Sorrento. I took her everywhere. I wanted her to be happy, you see. So I took her to the circus."

Outside, by the shop door, stood a little girl, strangely fair. She listened as she chewed, her blue eyes wide.

"This man, he was nothing to look at. A little weed. Sinewy, perhaps, and possibly strong. Not as strong as me, of course. And small. A very small man." The barber, with a disdainful gesture, threw the shaving brush into the bowl. He took up the razor, examining the edge carefully.

Once, he glanced at the man in the dark cloak, who was leaning forward, poised like a panther, his hand on the knife hilt. Or was it simply my imagination? I saw their eyes meet.

The little shop was like an oven, but a chill ran over my perspiring flesh. If they were going to start using knives now, I wanted to get out. I half rose from my chair.

The barber turned to me with a gesture which was courteous but also compelling. "Very soon, sir. Quickly. I will not keep you long." The razor flashed in the reflected glare from the street.

A youth in black drainpipe jeans and an orange-hued shirt leaned against the window outside, his back to us. One could

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see his jaws working on the ubiquitous gum. Silently, but rhythmically, the barber stropped his razor. The two motions, the steady chewing and the rhythmic stropping, made the air heavy, almost soporific. I closed my eyes, and sweated.

I opened them to a stealthy movement, expecting to see a blade lunging into someone's belly. But it was only the youth by the window, sidling round the door. I noted with surprise the unlighted cigarette which hung from his working jaws, but apparently this combination is not unusual in these parts. Cigarettes are expendable; gum lasts for ever. The youth sat down on the bench, next to the man in the cloak.

"Get on with the story, Matteo," he said. His voice was half a whine, half a snarl.

The barber looked at him as he might regard a rat he was about to step on. "You want a shave, Giorgio?" he demanded.

"Haircut," said the boy. He was a character in a gangster film: his lips barely moved as he spoke. The man next to him had ignored his arrival, but now he raised a corner of the black cloak and shook it, as if the lad's contiguity might have contaminated it, but his eyes continued to watch the movements of the barber.

"All right," said the latter. "You want a haircut. You certainly do want a haircut. But you wait till last, you see, Giorgio. And you shut up. You keep your big little mouth shut in my shop. You understand, Giorgio?"

The boy's brown skin took on a deeper hue, and he lowered his eyelids till his eyes were slits. But he nodded, with affirmative vigour. Clearly a split personality!

"Good," said the barber, and glanced over at me. "Now, sir, where was I?"

"You were telling me about this man. No, this circus."

"Ah yes, I remember." He paused, bursting with recollection. "Now, this little man, he was a trapeze artist. This little man!" He paused again, and swept the razor, with one magnificent sweep, from the left of the adam's apple to the point of the chin.

I shivered, in spite of the overpowering heat. Certainly the shortest distance between two points! But the man underneath the razor did not stir; in fact, he appeared to be asleep. The barber made another deft, effective stroke then raised his hand, looking about him.

"You see, they all want to hear the story, although they have heard it a hundred times! Even him!" He nodded contemptuously, and my gaze followed his nod to the man in the black cloak. He was no longer young, this man, but one could see he

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was strong and sinewy. At one time, he could have been a trapeze artist. Also, although not to be ignored, he was small.

"This small man," repeated the barber, "was a trapeze artist. And my Annalina took a fancy to him. Not love. It could not be love. How could it be, when she had me? She wanted a change, I suppose. We all want a change, sometimes." He plied his razor, moodily.

"But I didn't know she fancied the man. I simply took her to the circus because she wanted to go. I thought she liked the animals and the clowns. It was a pleasure to watch her laughing at the clowns. I was certain it was the clowns. Then this trapeze act—it wasn't very good—used to come on at the end of the evening. There was a woman in it with this small man—a big strong woman, and fat. She wasn't bad looking. She might have been beautiful once. But she was old, far too old."

The small, fair child suddenly slid into the shop and leaned against the wall. The barber ignored her. When she opened her mouth, one could see the gum on her tongue.

"Annalina used to watch the trapeze act quietly. One couldn't imagine she saw anything special in it. Then, on the last night of the week, I could not go to the performance. I was the mayor in those days and there was a meeting, so I let Annalina go with her mother.

"That is, I thought she went with her mother. It turned out she really went with a girlfriend. I don't know what happened that night. Even the girlfriend didn't know, although I tried to make her remember." A reminiscent grin crossed his face. "All I know is that when I woke next morning, Annalina was not at home. She was gone, and the circus was gone."

He wiped the razor and started dabbing soap on the customer's chin again.

"I followed the circus to the next town. I found it quickly enough, but Annalina and the trapeze man had disappeared during the journey. The manager didn't know, nobody knew what had happened to them. I had a motorbike in those days, and I didn't go home. I just started looking for them. I went everywhere. I went to Napoli and Sorrento and Amalfi. I went over the mountains to Foggia and Bari and Barletta, and then down to Brindisi and Taranto. Everywhere I asked questions and made myself look a fool, but nobody had seen them.

"So I went up the coast to Ancona, then inland again to Foligno and Terni and Perugia. I went to Firenze and Bologna. I wanted to kill them. I went right through Lombardy to Milano,

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then back to Genova. I was sick and mad. The world had dropped away from my feet.

"Years later I found out they had stayed for a couple of months in Mondragone, not ten miles from here. All that time I was covering the length of Italy looking for them."

He took up the razor and leaned over the customer. His heavy face was sombre with the telling of his tragedy. Like most Italians of his class, he got every ounce out of life by living in the moment, even the moment of telling a story.

He put his left hand in the small of the man's shoulder and his great olive face right up to the man's chin. Then he started to shave again with short, neat, intent strokes. One could see he knew what he was doing, and that the customer was perfectly safe. But one could see also that he was doing it as an automaton, his mind far away as he searched the peninsula for his lost wife.

"I came down through Rome. I stopped there for two days, and while I was there the war started. I had to hurry home and three months later I was in the army."

It seemed that the light in the small shop had suddenly dimmed. I looked up, thinking some rare cloud had obscured the sun for a while, and I saw the reason for the shadow. On the other side of the window, and by the open door, a compact crowd of onlookers stood listening. Men, women, and children; workmen and housewives; and at least one specimen of every beggar, vagrant, and layabout that a small Italian town can produce—they were all there. A couple of young girls, hardly arrived at adolescence, blocked the doorway. Their mouths wide with acquiescence, their breasts artificially prominent, they watched the barber with eyes brimming with hero worship. Occasionally, they got an appreciative glance from the hero himself.

"You see," he repeated, nodding at me, "they all want to hear my story. They have all heard it before and they all want to hear it again." He winked at the girls, who giggled delightedly, then leaned forward with his razor again.

"They grow up quickly here," he observed, "quicker than they do in the north." The girls watched him patiently, no longer giggling, but absolutely silent. "You think your English and American girls mature more quickly than they used to, but to me they still look like little pullets. Hard to the touch. No softness in them." He started scraping carefully with the razor. A soft sigh escaped from each of the watching girls. "But here, they're soft before you touch them. They *look* soft, and they melt when you take hold of them. My Annalina was like that. All softness." He paused, then continued more factually, reminiscently.

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"I had a hard time in the desert; even in Tripoli itself it was difficult to get wine and cigarettes sometimes. And when I got back, my shop had been shelled to pieces. It was a big shop, with three assistants, and a lovely plate glass front, but it was all gone."

He straightened his back and pushed out his huge chest. "But did I sit crying? No. I got a shack, and started again. Then I got this place. Soon I shall have the big front again."

A woman, dressed in black, pushed her way through the crowd at the door. The two girls eyed her curiously.

"Your washing ready, Matteo?" she demanded without ceremony, her thick features lined with fatigue.

He lifted his razor with a delicate gesture, and nodded. "Inside," he said, and watched her sardonically as she disappeared behind the curtain at the back. "Already I've got people working for me," he continued. "In a year or two, another shop, more people working for me."

The curtain parted and the woman appeared again, a wide basket piled high with towels, overalls, and aprons clutched to her breast. She staggered through the watching crowd, which parted to let her pass. She was gone again, but the curtain at the back remained lifted. The black-eyed wench had prepared the refreshment.

"Coffee, Matteo?" she said, her mouth wide with invitation.

His glance was a casual caress. "Later, Tina mia," he responded. "First, I must tell this gentleman the story. Then, I must shave him. Keep it hot."

She smiled with impudence, and then the curtain obscured her saucy face. It struck me that the barber was surrounded with acquiescence. He could afford to be casual. He leaned forward to his task. The shave was almost completed. There would be the lotion, and the powder. Then, for the sparse hair, the brush-up, the pomade, the spray.

"For eight years I did not see them. They might have vanished from the earth. They might have been dead. Then, a year or two after the end of the war, they came back here. They came back with another circus, a very poor little circus, as they were after the war. And they were doing the trapeze act together. I didn't find out about it at once, because naturally I'm not very fond of circuses, but after the first performance certain of my friends made it their business to let me know they were there.

"Why did they come back? Who knows. Perhaps they thought it was their fate. People believe in fate, in these parts. They will even go out of their way to meet it. Anyway, there

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they were, and I went to see the second performance, determined to kill them both afterwards. But, as I watched the act, my mind began to change. One or two things were different."

The barber was going apace with his story, well into the swing of it. His eyes rolled magnificently, and whenever he could spare a free hand he flung it out in mighty gesticulations.

"My Annalina, she was not so beautiful. She was older, you see. And I noticed, even as he tossed her above the sawdust, that she was going to have a baby. And the man, he was older, much older. Still lean, still strong. But old, and small, and wizened.

"I almost felt sorry for them. So I didn't kill them. I went to each performance, and afterwards I simply waited at the entrance to the big tent until they came out. And I stood with my hand on my knife and watched them walk by me, arm in arm, heads very high. They tried to look proud, indifferent, as if I were not there. As if they didn't care, anyway!" He laughed shortly. "But soon the heads were not so very high."

He dragged the customer upright in the chair, as one might pull up a stuffed dummy, and started to plaster pomade into the thin hair. "After the last performance here, the very last, she had a miscarriage. So there was no baby. She was ill. The circus went on, it left them behind, and they lost their places. They stayed here. After all, they were no longer young."

The barber shrugged, and then with a flourish he whipped the towel from the customer's neck, and the overall from his body. "One of these days I shall kill him, of course. And he knows it. So does everyone else. That is part of the story."

Over by the window, the man in the black cloak rose, adjusted his great hat, and with the unbending rigidity of a Spanish Don left the shop.

"I shall kill him, but there is no hurry." Matteo turned his face to me as he spoke, but his hand was stretched out for the money of the customer. "It is a matter of honour between us. He knows I *must* kill him. Of course, he might kill me. But I think it unlikely."

With his fist round the dirty notes he turned to nod briefly, and the customer also departed, apparently well satisfied. "I must kill him some time," he continued. "He did me a terrible injury. He robbed me of love, of happiness, when I was young, when I could best make use of them." He referred to love and happiness as he might speak of the haircream and razor blades which he dispensed to his customers. "So I must kill him."

It was like a litany, as if the man were trying to convince

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himself of his good faith. Meanwhile, the shop was rapidly becoming empty. Young Giorgio slid out as he had slid in, the unlighted cigarette still dangling from his thin lips. The barber shot a glare after him.

"Haircut tomorrow, Giorgio?" he shouted.

Giorgio grinned from the door. "If I can get some money," he responded. The little fair girl had disappeared. The crowd of peasants, artisans, vagrants, and nondescripts had vanished and melted away as if the fierce midday sun had frizzled them to nothing on the cobbles of the street.

"You are next, signore," said the barber courteously, with a slight bow of his ponderous frame.

It was perfectly apparent that I was next. Nobody else was there. I sat in the seat of execution, feeling nonplussed. Why all the fuss? What had been the point of the story?

He pressed my neck firmly back on the rest and began to plaster my chin with the same lather he had used with the last customer. I did not protest. Indeed, I couldn't, for the brush flew rapidly and dangerously all over my features as he worked swiftly and silently.

At last he put down the brush, or rather flung it into the bowl, and started to strop his razor. I raised my head cautiously and spoke through the lather. "You say they stayed in this town?"

He ceased to strop and regarded me quizzically, almost as if he had expected the question. "Yes," he replied.

"Well, what happened to your wife?"

Again he began to strop the razor, with long, even motions. "You saw that woman who came in for the laundry?"

"Yes, but surely . . ."

"That is Annalina. She does washing for a living. Mostly mine. And she practically keeps him."

Appalled, I was silent for a moment. Dreams of youth, what do they come to? I thought of that drab, shabby woman in black, her face rigid with fatigue, and her body weakening under the weight of that vast load of dirty linen. And I remembered the girl of whom he had first spoken, the one with the little backside which everyone had turned to watch.

"But after all this time," I said at length, "surely you can forgive her? Why not have her back? She must regret it."

"She is old," he said simply. He made it sound like the ultimate sin. Perhaps it is.

At the back of the shop I heard a youthful giggle. Straining my eyes, I could see a bold, fresh young face peeping through the curtains. "Coffee, Matteo?"

"A moment, Tina mia."

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I saw that his argument was unanswerable. But there were still points about the story which had me puzzled. I continued to puzzle until he had scraped my tender chin for the second time.

"But that man?" I said. "He sat with his hand on the knife all the time. He could have killed you as you worked."

The barber stood away from me, his liquid eyes as puzzled as mine.

"Which man do you mean, signore?"

"The man in black, by the window. He had a knife . . ."

"Oh, you mean old Antonio." He laughed. "He used to be an actor and he can't stop acting. He always comes when I tell the tale. Every day. It gets him excited. But he's harmless. Just an old fool. Pomade, sir?"

"No, thank you. What about the trapeze artist? What happened to him?"

"He was the man I shaved before you, signore."

I sat up in the chair. Despite my refusal, he took the opportunity to slap a large dab of sticky pomade on my scalp. "But I hardly noticed him," I protested.

He grinned cheerfully. "Nobody ever does, at first. That was my mistake, at first."

"Apparently your wife noticed him," I ventured.

His eyes flashed brilliantly. "That was *her* mistake," he said.

My hair was a sticky, glutinous mass, well plastered down. He released me and I stood up to pay him.

"Tell me," I said, "does he often come here to be shaved?"

"Every day."

"And pays with the money your wife earns?"

"Exactly."

"Extraordinary. You could—I mean, all things considered, your razor might slip."

He smiled. "Why do you think I get the crowd?"

"They are waiting for it to happen?"

"Naturally."

"And when will it happen?" I persisted.

"Well, I don't know. Of course, I ought to kill him, and he knows it. That is why, I think, he comes every day, just to give me the chance. He is a man of honour, you see. Also, perhaps he is a little tired of Annalina. She can get very cantankerous, doing my washing, so at home I suppose . . ." He spread his large capable hands.

"But will you kill him?" I insisted, perhaps infected by the bloodthirstiness which haunts these parts.

"Possibly. But—" he looked about him carefully and lowered

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his voice—" as long as I *don't* kill him, signore, it is good for business. It keeps people interested in the shop."

I could hear the coffee bubbling. I could smell the odour of it. The odour was marvellous.

" You will have a cup of coffee, signore? "

" Very kind. But no, thank you. I must hurry. Buon giorno."

I retreated, to my midday drink, to my dinner in Naples. I did not want to intrude on that little ménage at the back of the shop.

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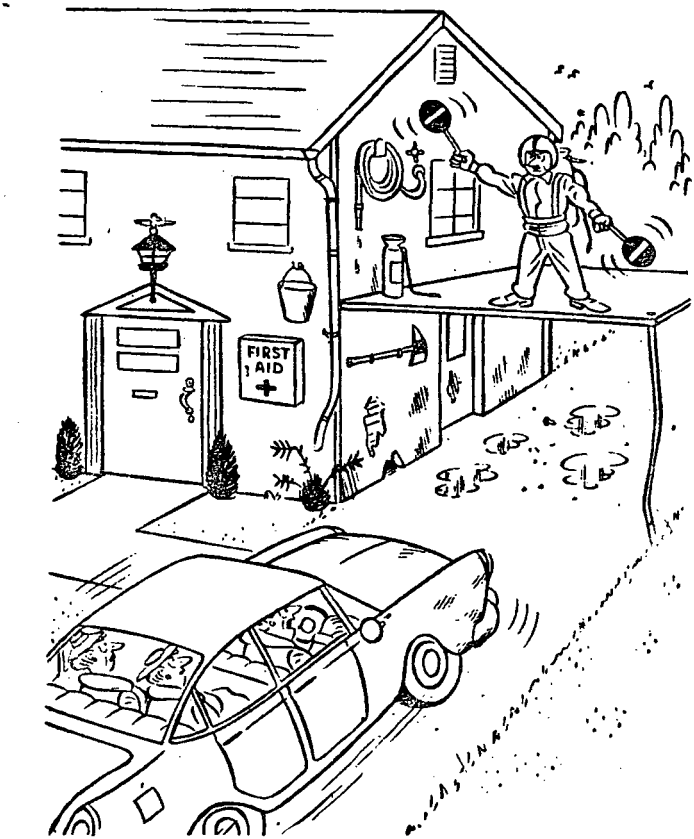

" I hate Don's attitude about my bringing the car into the carport."

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KEY TO THE DOOR

Two extracts from Sillitoe's new novel, set in the raw, virile world of Saturday Night and Sunday Morning featuring Vera's son Brian —Arthur Seaton's brother— Brian's girl Pauline, and once again cousin Bert.

By ALAN SILLITOE

THE two girls were down already, and out of the door before a word was spent between the four of them, spread in a line across the street.

"Where are we going then?" Pauline wanted to know.

"Out," Brian told her.

"Clever bogger!" She thumped him.

"Leave my mate alone," Jim said.

"Men," Joan exclaimed. "Allus stick together. Where're we goin' anyway? That's what I'd like to know as well."

Brian hoped he wouldn't be contradicted. "Up Cherry Orchard."

"It's too far," Joan said. "I don't know what you want to go up there for anyway."

"I do," Jim laughed.

"Well, you wain't catch me going," Pauline said decisively.

Brian winked at him. "We'll go in that direction anyway."

"You can stop that, fawce dog," Pauline said. "I saw yer winking, Brian."

"You want your eyes testing then."

"You'll get yourn blacked if you aren't careful," she threw back.

"He don't half think he's a cleverdick," Joan said, ganging up with her pal.

"Go and get dive-bombed," Brian said. "I only wanted you to come up Cherry Orchard."

Pauline was as tall as Brian; long brown hair spreading back

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over her buttoned-up dark brown coat, that hid a lighter overall dress he'd glimpsed as she came down the stairs. She had white skin, and large brown eyes that seemed to see everything as a defence against the fact that she saw very little. Jim said she was one of the fastest at her machine and wasn't so dreamy as she appeared, though both agreed that you wouldn't think so to look at her.

On some evenings, when left to their own thoughts or emptiness, undisturbed by the lack of talk, they walked arm-in-arm along sunlit lanes and streets that were silent between knocking-off time and dusk.

Brian felt her largeness when she was with him, noticed how delicate was the expression of her hands and face when seen against the gracelessness of her general movement. She had a good figure—he knew it well by now—fine pear-shaped breasts, noticeable hips, and legs a bit heavy. It was almost obtrusive—but not quite, for she was just below the stature that could have given her the label of a strapping girl.

She was arm-in-arm with Joan in front, and they went down Ilkeston Road, followed at fifty yards by Brian and Jim. "They don't seem in a good mood tonight."

"P'raps they've got the rags on," Jim laughed.

"I hope not," Brian said. "I like Pauline, though. She's a good sort, and passionate. How yo' going on with Joan?"

"All right. *She* don't say a deal either. Never says a dicky-bird sometimes all night. I asked her what was wrong once. We'd been tot' pictures, and I thought she was fed up and ready to chuck me. I said, 'What's up, duck?' when I was walking her home later. 'A penny for your thoughts,' I said, and she burst out crying. She never told me what for either. I'd thought she looked a bit funny earlier on when she was in our house 'aving a cup of tea and some toast. When I kissed her good night though, she was ever so passionate; so it blew over and she was as right as rain next day at work."

Brian saw Jim's courting as a more intense affair than his own. Not only did Jim work near his sweetheart—often called over to fix the belt on her machine, or to clean and oil it—but she spent most of every evening helping Jim's mother, or sitting with him to guard his sisters and brothers while his parents were at the pictures.

Pauline had never been to the Seatons, and neither did Brian have the intimacy of being with her all day at work. They met on many nights of the week, but whereas Jim and Joan had a physical closeness about them like any young couple a year married, Brian and Pauline were still at the hit-and-run stage,

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would melt away and almost forget each other until the next date because only the need to make love drew them together.

Brian had never asked her to come home and sit in with his mother and father, Fred and Arthur and Margaret and Sammy, as if she belonged there. He envied this state between Joan and the Skeltons, but was somehow unable to build up a similar relationship between himself and Pauline. He spent many evenings at her house, and the two families had at one time known each other, but Pauline had never in any case suggested that she come to his home. Brian thought that maybe she was too shy to ask this, and he used her shyness—if it existed—as a way of preventing her from doing so.

The idea of Pauline at home with his father and mother gave him spasms of embarrassment, and he was unable to say whether this was because he thought he would be ashamed or whether it was because he knew Pauline would dislike it and feel out of place. He didn't want his mother and father to know he was courting, wanted to keep his second life a secret from them as if, should they know, it would result in their sharing this love and intimacy and making it less real to him.

But when his mother once said, " I met Mrs. Mullinder today and she says you're going out with their Pauline," he didn't feel at all embarrassed, though he still wouldn't ask Pauline home.

" I go out with her now and again," he told his mother.

" Well," she said, " that's all right. She's a nice gel. Only don't come here though if you get anybody into trouble." And that was that.

It was getting dark as they passed Radford station. Good, Brian thought, I don't want to see anybody I know—though no sooner had this crossed his mind than Uncle George came biking over the hill from Woodhouse, calling as he went by, " Now then, Brian, you're a bit young to be courting, aren't you? "

He put a good face on it, bawling back, " Ar, I'm doing all right an' all."

Fancy shouting out like that, though he laughed at remembering back to when George had persuaded Vera to introduce him to a young unmarried woman in the yard, and she had sent Brian to tell Alice Dexter she wanted to see her a minute—all to help her stingy brother, blacksmith George. When Alice Dexter came into the house George picked up a newspaper to make her think he'd been reading like a sober educated man, but he'd been unable to read from birth and the paper was upside down. Which caused periodic laughs in the family especially from Seaton because he couldn't read either, and would never try to impress anybody that way by pretending he could.

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Wind blew across the bare dark stretch of the Cherry Orchard. "Are you all right, duck?" he said to Pauline. "Keep well wrapped up."

"It ain't cold," she whispered. The others were a merging shadow far to the left, intent on finding their own private hollow in which to snug down.

He held her tightly around the waist. "We'll find a good place."

Stars were pale and liquid-eyed, each as if nervous at not knowing whether it was next to be hidden away. "It's marvellous out here. It's warm and lonely."

"It is an' all," he responded. "My grandma used to live over there"—pointed far off into the darkness. "And my grandad. He was a blacksmith."

An inexplicable pride came at the thought of his grandfather having been a blacksmith.

Blacksmith was a word of skill and hardiness: a smith makes things, and black means the toughest sort of work—like when I did that bout of flue-cleaning—the shaping of iron and steel between hammer and anvil, moved by muscle in a subtle mixture of controlled strength.

"Oooooh!" Pauline drawled out. "Mek a wish, Brian."

"What for? Mind that bush."

"I saw a shooting star."

"I didn't though"—pulled out of his blacksmith world.

"There's another one, look"—still pointing.

"Yes, I saw that one," he was glad to own. "I've made a wish."

"So've I."

"What did yo' wish?" he wanted to know.

"I'm not telling you. It don't cum true if you tell anybody."

"Well," he teased, "I shan't tell you what I wished then."

"I'm not asking you to," she said, offended. "Don't if you don't want to."

"What do you think I am?" he cried, indignant. "If you wain't tell me I'm not going to tell yo'."

"Well," she said, "if you tell me what yo' wished, mine'll still come true."

"Mine wain't though," he reasoned, no thought of self-sacrifice.

"P'raps our wishes was the same," she ventured. This put him on his guard.

"I bet they worn't." I didn't wish we could get married, he told himself. It's enough if she did, though I'll bet she'll be wrong.

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"You know what mine was though, don't you?" she said, pressing his hand.

He did. It leapt across with no words, a shaft of love unseen in the darkness, meeting the wish he had made because no other was possible for him, being with his girl in the middle of the Cherry Orchard in the first darkness of a spring evening. Her words came sweet, into an isolation of something better than he'd ever known, even though it wasn't the first time they'd worked out this desire between them.

"Mine was the same," he said, seeing the two lines written on the picture in the Nook parlour:

If you love me as I love you,
nothing will ever part us two.

The sentiment quickly vanished because he thought that if he told it to Pauline she might laugh and see him as too sloppy to go out with. Not that he was unhappy at this.

A moon was up, had severed all connection with the chimney-pots of distant houses, was responsible for the faint luminous gleam that held the humps and hollows and solitary bushes back from the hand of complete darkness. A gentle warm infiltration of visibility overspread from hedge and houses to a vale of Serpent Wood, a vague light giving the impression that the dwindling countryside of the half-mile Cherry Orchard was a vast and untouchable heathland through which no arteries of life ran. He pulled up a handful of fresh grass to smell.

"I can't see Jim and Joan any more," she said.

"They're just over there," he told her. "They'd hear us if we shouted." To stop any idea of it he drew her to him, arms fastened around the waist and shoulders of her coat. He caught her mouth, half-open to start some reply to his remark, and felt the moist warm surprise of her lips that closed and hardened to a passionate response, her arms also reinforcing the kisses that she seemed to try and repulse only by increasing the forward pressing of her own.

The uneven ground caused him to lurch, and though he kept balance without thinking where to place his feet he succeeded in breaking the force of her kisses, holding her to him and placing his lips on her at such an angle that it was impossible for them to breathe. Both knew the meaning of this manœuvre; it gave each a chance of proving that the power of greatest love was on their side; for the one who craved breath first bore the lesser love.

The closeness of her body and the pressure of her face and lips hardened and sweetened the urgent rod of his loins. He moved his lips over hers, neither taking nor giving breath, prolonging the fleshy meeting with her mouth which was one second dormant and

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then moving to prove that she loved him with all her strength and was nowhere near losing the contest. He went harder into her face, wanting to lift his head away from her though, and laugh and pull in gusts and lettershapes of pure air, but the sweetness of Pauline, the well and slight shifting of her lips drew him in so that his kisses, like tears, grew in strength at the feel of her love.

The wind came against them like an outside kiss from the distant curve of the woods, the last leapfrogged obstacle down from the bleak Pennines, and as the pushing within grew at the deep prolonged valley of the kiss, the air and grass and darkness outside pulled away and left them in the grip of an insoluble torment of love. Pauline's hands were at his neck, around under the hair at the back of his head, and she hoped that he would see through her equal torment and relax his wild unfeeling pressure by allowing her to breathe and win because she loved him more.

His inner world grew to a blind illuminated space, the inside of a sphere that marked the limit of all pictures in his mind and turned his kiss-breaking into a vision. This was marvellous. He wanted to breathe, but held himself even though the artistry of his kisses suffered, went on through brief seconds of control with each one the reason for further prolongation. His hands roamed up and down her back, from neck to shoulders to take away the drumbeats of his lungs protesting against such obstinacy. I love you, Pauline, I love you. Give in. Start breathing and let me prove it.

She pulled him tighter, as if to say that the kiss could go on for another five minutes for all she cared. His knees shook. He moved his head from side to side to keep a further second of breath in him: like swimming under water and hoping to reach a better part of the shore before surfacing. Though her lips were fast closed she swayed also, moaned and tried shaking his head away. He knew that a few more seconds would kill him, for his lungs were barrels of gunpowder and the only vision left in his lighted sphere was that of a curving fuse going into them, with smoke that had travelled along it now close. If he kept on he would die like a man does when he drowns.

She drew her hands away and he wondered what was happening—until her fists came down, and in the crash they made against his spine he heard her taking enormous drinks of breath out of the air. Tears were on her cheeks and he went in this time to a kiss of love in which both could breathe, so that he felt tears springing to his own eyes, but tears of laughter and happiness. They leaned against each other, hands free. "I love you, Brian," she said.

They went into a wide hollow and lay down by a bush, dark

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banks bringing the night closer. The earth felt damp under his hand, and she drew him down to it, spreading kisses like salt on his face as if to recompense them both for his victory of kisses up in the field and bring them back to loving. He tasted the sweetness of her lipstick and opened each button of her coat as he fought back his own kisses into her loving mouth.

They afterwards lay in the dip of the Cherry Orchard with no watch between them to tell what time it was, each smoking a cigarette to give taste and body to the fragrance of their exhaustion and an illusion of comforting warmth to the humid freshness of the night.

"You ought to get yoursen a topcoat," she said. "You'll get pneumonia like that, duck."

He laughed. "Not me. I've got blood like boiling water. A walking stove."

"Still," she said. They walked out of the hollow. "It must be after nine. I wonder what happened to the others?"

"Gone, I expect. Joan lives at Lenton, don't she?" He felt loosened from the fever, vibrant and sharp against the night air, as much in love with the rustle of bushes and odours of soil and grass as with Pauline. He stopped and drew another kiss from her, gentle and indrawn.

"Well," she said with a laugh, "you can never have enough, can you?"

"I can't"—taking her naked hand by the dark shadows of Colliers' Pad.

They came to the lights of the main road. "Mam and Dad'll be at the pictures being's it's Friday," she said. "I don't expect they'll be back yet."

"If your dad's in p'raps we'll 'ave a game o' darts. I'm hoping to beat 'im one of these days."

"You'll never do that. He had too much practice when he was in 'ospital." He agreed: Ted Mullinder had been bed-bound through an accident at the pit. A truck underground had run into his foot and all but crushed it when coming back from the face one day. He'd got off too soon at the skip, thinking the truck had stopped when it hadn't. It was as if a shark had got him; pain leapfrogged to his brain and exploded there, blowing him into a mixed land of blackout and dreams in which he had mistaken his own pain and suffering for somebody else's, then woken up to find with horror that it had been his own.

Operation after operation, and now he was a sad asthmatic cripple with a job on top, the only compensation being that he had become the unbeatable champion of the local darts team. On

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most nights he made his way on two sticks to the John Barleycorn, slung down three pints of mild and got his hand in before a game by going round the clock. Though able to stand, he played from a chair set at the regulation paint mark, preferring to sling his arrows this way because his hospital marksmanship had been built up from a wheelchair. He was broad-shouldered and dark, kept in life and friendship by sufficient bouts of ironical cheerfulness, buttressed against despair by his wife and four daughters.

Mullinder now sat at the table with his bad leg spread towards the fire while his wife, a tall nutbrown gipsylike woman, followed Brian and Pauline in with a loaded enamel teapot and set it before him. What a life, Brian observed, waited on like a king. Not that I wish it was me, with that bad foot.

Eleven-year-old Maureen took up the other side of the hearth to read a comic. "Hey-up, Brian," she called out, no sooner was he in.

"Did you pass your scholarship?" he asked. You could tell she was one of the family all right, her face oval and alive, and even more mischievous because of her age.

"I don't know yet. But I don't care if I pass or not. I'll feel daft in a uniform and all that. I want to go to work when I'm fourteen, not stay till I'm sixteen."

"Don't be barmy," Mullinder said. "You're a lot better off at school. You don't know you're born until you start wok, Maureen Madcap!"

"I'll get mad all right in a bit, our dad. I've told you before not to call me Maureen Madcap." But from almost crying with shame and shyness she called to Brian, "Hey, Brian, you know what heppens when you wash too much?"

"What?"

"You get soap rash! Don't you, our dad?"

"Go on," he called. "I reckon Maureen Madcap's the name for yo' right enough."

Mrs. Mullinder set Pauline to wash more cups, and put Brian at the supper table facing her husband. "Tek a couple o' them cheese sandwiches," she said. "I hope you don't mind sacs in your tea, but I don't get the sugar ration till tomorrow."

"That's all right. We've got nowt else but them." He felt it strange that an issue should be made of it, as if he'd strayed into a higher degree of civilisation than he was used to. Tea was tea whether it was dosed with saccharine or sugar. In fact the ration at home was always three weeks in advance because his mother had wheedled it out of the grocer.

"She's clever," Mr. Mullinder laughed when Brian mentioned it. "When the war ends she'll have had three weeks for nowt."

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"What's the score on the Russian front these days?" Mullinder asked, teasing Brian's obsession, who took him seriously.

"They'll be in Germany soon. I'm sure they'll get to Berlin before anybody else."

"Let's hope they stay there," Mullinder said. "They want to finish off that lot once and for all this time."

Brian ripped into a sandwich. "I'll say."

"Get my fags out o' my mac pocket, Pauline," her old man said. Brian liked to see her doing such things, washing up, slicing bread, paring cheese, and spreading butter. He observed the mature sixteen-year-old shape of her body as best he could with so many in the house, saw how attractive it showed when prised out of the voluminous thick coat and clothed only in the light overall dress she had worked in by her machine all day. The raw animal sweetness lingering from their lovemaking in the Cherry Orchard still beat in his loins, and now and again as she passed him at the table he caught a faint odour of her face and skin, of powder and lipstick she lightly used—though her father had told her time and time again not to wear it.

He was surprised that no one could twig they had spent the last hour loving each other, felt it should be showing in their eyes and the way they moved.

He ate his food slowly, drank tea, only half aware of the squabble going on between Maureen and Doris, the eldest daughter who was to be married in a month and seemed to be getting her bellyful of family fights before leaving them off for good. Mullinder switched the news on hopefully, but it didn't get a look in, so with a pit curse—also drowned—he flicked it off again. I don't know how he puts up with this racket, though maybe he likes it—you never know. It's certainly a lively family. If there was an argument like this in our house fists and pots would be flying already.

Pauline sat opposite eating her supper. She caught his look and picked up her cup of tea to dispel it.

He was overwhelmed by an impossible thought, an outlandish idea that would drag him from all settled notions of work and courting (and freedom that nevertheless existed between the two states) and set him on a course so new and head racking, yet in a way perhaps wonderful and good, that he wished the vision of it had never fixed itself like a hot picture-transfer against his skin. Maybe she already is pregnant, he thought, we've done it often enough.

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ON his first leave from squarebashing Brian had got into Nottingham at eight of an evening, having taken most of the day to travel from the back end of Gloucestershire. Reaching the wide green flatlands of the Trent beyond Brum, he felt so much excitement that he couldn't eat the sandwiches and cake dashed out for at the last stop. Cows were dotted by peaceful and diminished streams and sunlight still burnt into the packed corridor, and he felt himself being channelled nearer to Nottingham with every circling clatter of the wheels.

The excitement in him was not so much at seeing Pauline as at the sensation in his stomach of being lost once more in the vast familiar spider's web of Nottingham and all the comfortable meaning of it.

After a hullo cup of tea with Mam and Dad in Radford he hopped a couple of buses to see Pauline on the estate out at Apsley. Perhaps by some fluke the house would be empty and they'd be able to love each other on the settee or roll about in one of the made beds upstairs; or if not that, then happen they could go for a walk beyond the Broad Oak and snug down in some dry field of sweet summer grasses.

Everybody was in, at supper, as if they'd been waiting specially to greet him after his first ten weeks drilling like a brainless ragbag for his king and country. You never got what you hoped for, so he might have known it would be like this. Mrs. Mullinder poured him tea in the pint-sized mug that used to be old Mullinder's favourite—a gesture indicating that Brian was already part of the tribal loot.

Fourteen-year-old Maureen sat reading *Oracle* by the fire, all self-conscious with her small high bosom and trace of lipstick, her face the spit-image of Pauline's when he'd started courting her at fifteen. They're a goodlooking family, he thought, though feeling uneasy at the mother's gaze and the comparative silence in spite of the fact that there were five people in the room.

"You look a bit as if you've had a hard time in the air force," Betty said with a sly grin. "Do you get good grub?"

"Not bad. Sometimes it's pigswill though."

Pauline didn't say much either, face half hidden by the hair as she opened a tin of fruit on the other side of the table. However, he was too involved eating his way through the still-lavish supper to let the atmosphere disturb him. Not that he expected them to put the flags out.

Afterwards he suggested a walk. "You'd better tell him while you've got the chance," he remembered Mrs. Mullinder saying. "And come to some arrangements."

She broke it on Coventry Lane. "I'm having a baby."

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They stopped by a gate, leaned on it so that he could take the shock. Even going into the air force hadn't wrenched the nuts-and-bolts of his world as loose as this piece of information. The picture of his life was shaken, sent spinning like an iron catherine-wheel in front of his eyes. He closed them tight, knew that this wasn't the way to take such news, so opened them on green fields rolling up to the tree-trunked bastion of Catstone Wood, a mist-green spearblade of sky above which, he realised through his shock, was coloured by the sun going down. "Roll on," he muttered with a long-drawn-out whistle of breath. "This is a stunner."

"That's nowt to what I said when I found out, I can tell you," she retorted, pale and firm-lipped.

She was half a stranger after ten weeks' absence, and he felt this wasn't a good way to get to know her again. He remembered how Joan and Jim had got married. It began a mere three months ago by Joan telling Jim that she was pregnant, and by the time she was able to say it was a false alarm they were engaged and didn't think it worth the fuss and bother to put off the tentative wedding date already fixed.

Jim told Brian at the time that being engaged made people look up to you, treat you with more respect, like an adult at last. But Brian didn't feel he needed that sort of respect, though wondered whether Pauline had taken a tip from Joan and was only saying she was pregnant to get him on the tramline to matrimony.

"Mam caught me being sick one morning and I said I had a bilious bout, but when it went on for a week she made me go to the doctor's with her. I already knew though in a way, because I'd missed a period. I kept hoping it wasn't true, that's all." She smiled, and he saw she wasn't concerned—like Joan had plainly been—to trick him into an engagement.

"It's a sod, i'n't it?" he said, half smiling back. He didn't know whether to laugh or cry, was gripped by a hotaches of the heart and brain.

"It is, if you look at it in that way," she answered. They walked arm-in-arm along the blue blackness of the lane, a cold wind blowing into their faces.

His next statement came almost without thought—at least he had wondered whether or not to say it, and decided he would before too much consideration stopped him. "We'll think about getting married."

"Do you want to?" she asked, in a dead-level inconsequential voice. He squeezed her arm.

"I do, if you want to know. If you'll 'ave me, that is."

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She laughed. "Maybe it's a case of having to!"

"We've been going out with each other long enough."

"In a way though I'm sorry it had to be a bit of a force-put. I don't like *having* to, if you see what I mean."

He was offended. "Why not then?"

"Oh, I don't know. It would have been better the other way."

"I suppose it would."

"Not that I want to get married in church or anything like that," she said. "It's oldfashioned now. As long as you're married, what does it matter?"

"That's a good job," he agreed, "though I don't expect it'll make your mam and Betty very happy."

"Well, it's us that matter, duck, i'n't it? Not many people bother wi' church nowadays."

"They don't," he said. "We should be in the Broad Oak knocking it back now, celebrating. It's supposed to be good when two people get engaged." He was fighting away from the part of himself that felt bear-trapped, leg-caught, and pulled into the earthpits of responsibility.

"I'd love to have a drink, but I can't face it just now."

"Neither can I in a way"—glad that she also felt the same mixed sensation of it all.

"Maybe tomorrow," he said. "Though I don't see the need for much hurry."

"Well, we can't dawdle either, can we?"

"I'll see to everything, don't worry. Get special leave and all that."

"As long as you aren't backing out," she said, a half serious caution to see how he'd take it.

"I would if I wanted to," he said firmly. "But I won't want to. I love you too much, you know that."

"As long as I know," she taunted.

"Well, I've told you," he cried. "I've been telling you for a long time."

"I know you have, duck."

"You never look as though you believe me though."

"What do you expect? We both go as far as we can."

This reference to the just-revealed fact that she was having a baby quietened his shock and he held her close. "Don't let's get mad, love."

"I've been worrying myself blind these last three weeks. Mam's been on to me as well."

"Why didn't you write and tell me?" he shouted in the darkness. "I'd a been out o' that camp like a shot. Nobody could have stopped me."

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"Well I don't know. I thought it wouldn't be the best thing, to write and tell you it in a letter. Mam said so as well when I told her."

"You thought I'd run away and never show my face?" he laughed.

Her hard knuckles thumped into his ribs. "No, you leary swine. But you can clear off now if you want to because I can soon have the baby and keep it myself without your 'elp. In fact that's what Mam said. 'Don't get married if you don't like him. But if you can, it'd be better.' So I don't care how much trouble it is, it ain't that much of a force-put. I didn't want to get married as early as this, no more than yo' did. So I'm not going to marry you just because I'm having a baby. I can allus live at home and stay at work."

He rubbed the pain out of his bones; her outbursts were the more abrupt and fiery in proportion to her at times angelic calmness. "You want to keep your temper. I was only having a joke."

"All right," she said, "but you ought to be nice to me sometimes."

"I often am—" he tried to hit off the correct ratio of his good nature—"but I come home on leave, rush straight to see you all the way from Gloucestershire and this is what you meet me with. You think it i'n't a shock for me as well?"

"I know it is, but I couldn't break it any other way, could I? I'm glad you've come though. It feels better for me now."

They drew into a long kiss by the hedge, stopped only when a car drove by and fixed them in its headlights before turning off at the Balloon Houses. "I don't feel bad about having a baby," she said. "I'm sure I'll like it, and that it'll be all right."

"It sounds O.K. to me. I suppose we let ourselves in for it." He was filled with joy and dread. The first shock had shown the future as a confused black ocean, which had lost much of its alarm however in the last half hour because a feeling of having gained some enormous happiness had gradually come into him. They crossed the main road, arms locked around each other, and walked into a wood on the far side.

The day before Brian was due back in Gloucestershire, Bert swung up in the yard, resplendent in beret and battledress and a couple of campaign ribbons won from the last push over the Rhine. He was quartered in Trieste and had travelled across Europe on a forty-hour journey of wooden seats to get himself—so he joked to Harold Seaton—an earful of Radford, a gutful of Shippoe's, and an armful of fat tart.

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They went out to walk part of the way together; Brian to see Pauline at Apsley, Bert to call on his brother at nearby Cinderhill. It was a dry, baking summer, seemingly endless because it had been on almost a week, and they swopped opinions on life in uniform, Brian disliking his incarceration mainly for a reason as yet unspoken to Bert, and Bert enjoying his experience because he had a marvellous time not having to worry where the next meal or shilling came from. "I might even sign on an extra three years," he said, "instead of coming out at Christmas. In fact I'm sure I shall."

"What do you want to do that for?" Brian asked. "There's plenty o' wok."

"I like it better than wok," Bert told him.

Over a sandstone wall lay a cemetery, cool grass waving and flowers spread on many graves, colours of snow and blood and mustard against marble. It was Sunday morning, and some people tended stones and urns, busying themselves with hedge-clippers and watering-cans.

Brian said to his cousin, "I'm signing on as well in a way, only for life. I'm getting married."

Both stopped walking. Bert took his arm and stared. "You're not."

"I am. To Pauline. Don't you think we've been courting long enough?"

"Come off it."

"What do you mean 'Come off it'?" He wanted more reaction than this, so little not indicating whether Bert thought him a fool or a grown-up, a madcap or a restless layabout who was getting spliced for want of anything new to do, or a shade of every reason. But he underestimated Bert, who looked at him slyly, shut one eye and demanded, "She's having a kid?"—at the same time offering a fag from a ten-pack to mollify such outrightness in case he was wide of the mark.

Brian's first thought was to say no, she bloody well wasn't, but who knew how much it would show by the time they were able to get married? And in any case when she had the kid it would be calculated in simple-finger arithmetic—digit by digit backdated—so that it was better to be thought trapped now than be seen to have been a frightened liar then.

"She's pregnant," he said, "and we're getting married."

They walked on, out of step now and Bert looking in at him as if to find a trace of lying on his face. "But you'll be done for," he raved suddenly. "You'll be hooked, finished, skewered, and knackered. Why don't you do a bunk?"

"Because I don't want to. I'd never be able to see her again."

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" Come off it. Sign on, get sent overseas, cut your throat, hang yourself. For Chrissake, you're only eighteen."

" I'll be nineteen next year," he grinned.

Bert was grieved. " I know, our Brian. You'll be twenty-one soon as well, and we'll give you the key to the bleeding door: can't you wait even that long? It's batchy to get married at eighteen. Think of all the fun you can still have. Running after all the women your eyes hook on to. I know it wain't suit yo' to get married, I do an' all. You ain't that sort. You're too much of a sod, like I am."

" I know," Brian said, " but I love her, you see. You think I'm trapped just because she's having a kid? Well, what you lose on the swings you gain on the roundabouts. If I didn't love her I might think twice about it."

" You've got to think twenty times about whether you love a tart or not."

Brian had thought a hundred times, and knew his mind by now on that subject anyway. Pauline was having a baby, and because he loved her they were going to get married.

There was no need to ask himself what he would have done if he hadn't loved her, if she'd been little more than a casual acquaintance. " What's made you get sloppy all of a sudden? " Bert demanded.

He turned on him, fists clenched and ready to be raised. " I'm not bloody well sloppy, so don't come it. I'm just doing what I want to do and what I think is right, and I'm not asking yo' whether it's good for me or not, because I know it is because I want it."

" Well," Bert said, " if that's the way you feel. All right, all right. Let me be best man then."

They shook on it and Bert seemed to think it a good idea Brian was getting married by the time they got around to changing the subject.

The cornfield was being subtly reduced in size. A combine-harvester came towards them, went on by, and passed before they were halfway across on their slow walk. The area of high corn seemed no smaller than before, and already the machine was a red beetle turning again towards the far side of the sloping field, its engine noise filling the autumn evening like the leisured omniscient growling of an invisible mastodon. A few bristles of withered corn lay over the path, like heads at which the big chop of the machine had suffered disappointment.

He reached for Pauline's hand as they ambled towards the shrub-covered hillside, a rising gradient of amber and bracken.

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He frowned with concern at her slight limp. "Does your foot hurt, love?"

"It aches across the top."

"We wain't walk far then," he promised, squeezing her hand tighter, hoping her foot would stop hurting if they ceased to think about it.

He fastened the polished buttons of his overcoat, smiled at her long brown hair tied by a piece of ribbon, and noticed the strength in her calm smooth face, her pouting lips, shining forehead—a face resting for the moment from make-up because she had said, "You don't mind me letting my hair down now and again, do you?" Not that she had ever been much addicted to the alchemy of powders and lipsticks.

The fresh smell of mown corn sharpened his regret that this would be their last night together for a few months, and he smiled to hide his anguish. "I suppose we should make the best of this evening."

She pressed his hand. "It worn't a very long leave, was it?"

"Long enough to get married in."

It was an' all.

"You don't regret it, do you?" A tractor passed slowly, pulling a dray loaded with the systematic droppings of the combine-harvester. The young driver had a sleeve of his shirt torn, and a farmhand on top of the sacks smiled as they passed.

"We're young, so everybody told me at work. But I think it's best to get married young."

"So do I," he laughed. "More time for being in bed together." They'd been married two weeks ago, both families (and the friends of both) crowding the vestibule of the downtown registry, and packing into the Trafalgar later for a noisy reception.

"Have you enjoyed this fortnight?"

She detected in his voice a sickness at heart simply because he was trying to hide it, at a time when they could hide nothing from each other.

"It's been marvellous," she answered. © Alan Sillitoe 1961

Alan Sillitoe's new novel, Key to the Door, is published by W. H. Allen

★

'Tis easy enough to be twenty-one:
'Tis easy enough to marry;
But when you try both games at once
'Tis a bloody big load to carry.

from the Midlands

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An ARGOSY Short-Short

HOBBYIST

By FREDRIC BROWN

I HEARD a rumour," Sangstrom said, "to the effect that you—" He turned his head and looked about him to make absolutely sure that he and the chemist were alone in the tiny prescription pharmacy. The chemist was a gnome-like gnarled little man who could have been any age from fifty to a hundred. They were alone, but Sangstrom dropped his voice just the same. "To the effect that you have a completely undetectable poison."

The chemist nodded. He came round the counter and locked the front door of the shop, then walked towards a doorway behind the counter. "I was about to take a coffee break," he said. "Come with me and have a cup."

Sangstrom followed him round the counter and through the doorway to a back room ringed by shelves of bottles from floor to ceiling. The chemist plugged in an electric percolator, found two cups, and put them on a table that had a chair on either side of it. He motioned Sangstrom to one of the chairs and took the other himself.

"Now," he said. "Tell me. Whom do you want to kill, and why?"

"Does it matter?" Sangstrom asked. "Isn't it enough that I pay for—"

The chemist interrupted him with an upraised hand. "Yes, it matters. I must be convinced that you deserve what I can give you. Otherwise—" He shrugged.

"All right," Sangstrom said. "The *whom* is my wife. The *why*—" He started the long story. Before he had quite finished the percolator had completed its task and the chemist briefly

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interrupted to get the coffee for them. Sangstrom concluded his story as they drank it.

The little chemist nodded. "Yes, I occasionally dispense an undetectable poison. I do so freely; I do not charge for it, if I think the case is deserving. I have helped many murderers."

"Fine," Sangstrom said. "Please give it to me, then."

The chemist smiled at him. "I already have. By the time the coffee was ready I had decided that you deserved it. It was, as I said, free. But there is a price for the antidote."

Sangstrom turned pale. But he had anticipated—not this, but the possibility of a doublecross or some form of blackmail. He pulled a pistol from his pocket.

The little chemist chuckled. "You daren't use that. Can you find the antidote—" he waved at the shelves—"among those thousands of bottles? Or would you find a faster, more virulent poison? Or if you think I'm bluffing, that you are not really poisoned, go ahead and shoot. You'll know the answer within three hours when the poison starts to work."

"How much for the antidote?" Sangstrom growled.

"Quite reasonable, a thousand dollars. After all, a man must live; even if his hobby is preventing murders, there's no reason why he shouldn't make money at it, is there?"

Sangstrom growled and put the pistol down, but within reach, and took out his wallet. Maybe after he had the antidote, he'd still use that pistol.

He counted out a thousand dollars in hundred-dollar bills and put them on the table.

The chemist made no immediate move to pick them up. He said, "And one other thing—for your wife's safety and mine. You will write a confession of your intention—your former intention, I trust—to murder your wife. Then you will wait till I go out and post it to a friend of mine in the homicide department. He'll keep it as evidence in case you ever *do* decide to kill your wife. Or me, for that matter.

"When that is in the post it will be safe for me to return here and give you the antidote. I'll get you paper and pen. Oh, one other thing—although I do not absolutely insist on it. Please help spread the word about my undetectable poison, will you? One never knows, Mr. Sangstrom. The life you save, if you have any enemies, just might be your own."

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To be positive: to be mistaken at the top of one's voice.
AMBROSE BIERCE.

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The King dictated it . . . diarist Samuel Pepys from his own peculiar shorthand transcribed it. The dramatic story of Charles' flight from the Battle of Worcester and his perilous adventures to France—and safety.

Royal Escape

BY SAMUEL PEPYS

AFTER that the battle was so absolutely lost as to be beyond hope of recovery, I began to think of the best way of saving myself; and the first thought that came into my head, was, that if I possibly could, I would get to London as soon, if not sooner, than the news of our defeat could get there: and it began near dark, I talked with some, especially with my lord Rochester, (then Wilmot,) about their opinions, which would be the best way for me to escape, it being impossible, as I thought, to get back into Scotland.

I found them mightily distracted, and their opinions different very much of the possibility of getting to Scotland, but not one agreeing with mine for going to London, saving my lord Wilmot; and the truth is, I did not impart my design of going to London to any but my lord Wilmot.

But we had such a number of beaten men with us (of the horse) that I strove, as soon as ever it was dark, to get from them; and though I could not get them to stand by me against the enemy, I could not get rid of them, now I had a mind to it.

So we (that is my lord duke of Buckingham, Luderdale, Derby, Wilmot, Tom Blake, duke Darcy, and several others of my

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servants) went along northward towards Scotland; and at last we got about sixty that were gentlemen and officers, and slipt away out of the high road that goes to Lancashire, and kept on to the right hand, letting all the beaten men go along the great road.

And ourselves not knowing very well which way to go, for it was then too late for us to get to London on horseback. So we rode through a town short of Woolverhampton, between that and Worcester, and went through. There being a troop of the enemy's there that night, we rode very quietly through the town, they having nobody to watch, suspecting us no more than we did them.

We went that night about twenty-five miles, to a place called White Lady, hard by Tong Castle, by the advice of Mr. Gifford, where we stopt and got some little refreshment of bread and cheese, such as we could get, it being just beginning to be day. As we came thither, there came in a country fellow that told us there was 3,000 of our horse hard by Tong Castle, upon the heath, all in disorder, under David Lesely, and some other of the general officers; upon which, some of the people of quality that were with me, were very anxious that I should go to him, and endeavour to get into Scotland, which I thought was absolutely impossible, knowing very well that the country would all rise upon us, and that the men who had deserted me, when they were in good order, would not stand to me when they had been beaten.

This made me take the resolution of putting myself into disguise, and endeavouring to get on foot to London in a country fellow's habit, with a pair of ordinary grey cloth breeches, and leathern doublet, and a green jerkin, which I took in the house of White Ladies. I also cut my hair very short, and flung my clothes into a privy house, that nobody might see that any body had been stripping themselves.

My lord Wilmot, who endeavoured to go on horseback, in regard, I think, of his being too big to go on foot, agreed upon a place for meeting at London, if we escaped.

As soon as I was disguised, I took with me a country fellow, whose name was Richard Penderell, whom Mr. Gifford had undertaken to answer for to be an honest man; he was a Roman Catholic, and I chose to trust them, because I knew they had hiding holes for priests, that I thought I might use in case of need.

I was no sooner gone (but the next morning after the battle, and broad day), out of the house with this country fellow, but being in a great wood, I set myself at the edge of the wood, near the highway, that was there, the better to see who came after us, and whether they made any search after the runaways; I immediately saw a troop of horse coming by, which I conceived to be the same troop that broke our 3000 horse. But it did not look

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like a troop of the army's but of the militia, for the fellow before it did not look at all like a soldier.

In the wood I stayed all day, without meat or drink, and by great good fortune it rained all the time, which hindred them, as I believe, from coming into the wood to search for men that might be fled thither; and one thing is remarkable enough, that those with whom I have since spoke of them that joined with the horse upon the heath, did say, that it rained little or nothing with them all the day, but only in the wood where I was, this contributing to my safety.

The truth is, my mind changed as I lay in the wood, as I resolved to think of another way of making my escape, which was to get over the Severn into Wales, and get either to Swansea, or some other of the seaport towns, that I knew had commerce with France, to the end that I might get over that way; I remembered several honest gentlemen that were of my acquaintance in Wales.

So that night, as soon as it was dark, Richard Penderell and I took our journey on foot towards the Severn; but as we were going in the night, we came by a mill, where I heard some people talking (membered that I had got some bread and cheese the night before at one of the Penderell's houses, I not going in) and as we conceived it was twelve or one o'clock at night, and the country fellow desired me not to answer if any body should ask me any questions, because I had not got the accent of the country, but as we came to the mill, we could see the miller, as I believe, sitting at the mill-door, he being in white clothes; it being a very dark night, he called out, Who goes there, upon which Richard Penderell answered, Neighbours going home, or some such like words; whereupon the miller cried out, Rogues, rogues, and men came out of the mill after us, who I believe were soldiers.

So we fell a running, both of us up the lane, as long as we could run, it being very deep and very dirty, till at last I bid him leap over a hedge and lie still, to hear if any body followed us, which we did, and continued lying down upon the ground about half an hour, when hearing nobody come, we continued our way over to the village upon the Severn, where the fellow told me there was an honest gentleman, one Mr. Woolf lived in that town, where I might be in great safety, for that he had hiding holes for priests.

But I could not go on till I knew whether he would receive so dangerous a guest as me, and therefore staid in a field under a hedge, by a great tree, commanding him only to ask Mr. Woolf whether he would receive an English gentleman, a person of quality, to hide him all the next day, till we could travel again by night, for I durst not go but by night.

Mr. Woolf, when the country-fellow had told him that it was

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one that had escaped from the battle of Worcester, said, that for his part it was so dangerous a thing to harbour any body that was known, that he would not venture his neck for any man, unless it was for the king himself; upon which Richard Penderell very indiscreetly, and without my leave, told him it was I, upon which Mr. Woolf replied, he should be very glad to venture all he had in the world to secure me.

So I came into the house a back way, where I found Mr. Woolf, an old gentleman, who told me he was very sorry to see me there, because there was two companies of the militia foot at that time in arms in the town, and kept a guard at the ferry, to examine every body that came that way, in expectation of catching some that might be making their escape that way, and that he durst not put me into any of the hiding-holes of his house, because they had been discovered; and that therefore, I had no other way of security, but to go into his barn, and lie behind his corn and hay.

So after he had given us some cold meat, that was ready, we, without making any bustle in the house, went and lay in the barn all the next day; when, towards evening, Mr. Woolf and his son brought us some meat into the barn, and there we discoursed with them whether we might safely get over the Severn into Wales, which they advised me by no means to adventure upon, because of the strict guards that were kept all along the Severn.

Upon which I took a resolution of going that night the same way back again to Penderell's house, where I knew I should hear some news what was become of my lord Wilmot, and resolved again upon going to London.

So we set out as soon as it was dark, but as we came by the mill again, we had no mind to be questioned a second time there, and therefore asking Richard Penderell if he could swim or no, and how deep the river was, he told me it was a scurvy river, not easy to be passed in all places, and that he could not swim.

So I told him that the river, being but a little one, I would undertake to help him over, upon which we went over some closes to the river side, and entering the river first to see whether I myself could go over, who knew how to swim, found it was but a little above my middle, and thereupon taking Richard Penderell by the hand, I helped him over. Which being done, we went on our way to one of the Penderell's brother's (his house being not far from White Ladies) who had been guide to my lord Wilmot, and we believed by that time might be come back again.

Penderell's brother told me, he had conducted my lord Wilmot to a very honest gentleman's house, one Mr. Whitgrave's, not far from Woolverhampton, a Roman Catholic. I asked him what news, he told me there was one major Carles in the house, who

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was that country man, whom I knowing, he having been a major in our army, and having made his escape thither, a Roman Catholic also, I sent for him into the room where I was, and he told me that he knew but one way how to pass the next day, and that was, to get up into a great oak in a pretty plain place, where we might see round about us, for the enemy would certainly search all the wood for the people that had made their escape.

Which proposition of his, I approving, we (that is to say, Carles and I) went and carried up some victuals, for the whole day, viz. some bread, cheese, and small beer, and nothing else, and got up into a great oak that had been lopp'd some three or four years ago, and being grown out again very bushy and thick, could not be seen through, and here we staid all the day; and I having in the mean time sent Penderell's brother to Mr. Whitgrave's, to know whether my lord Wilmot was there or no, and had word brought me that night that my lord was there; that there was a very secure hiding hole in Mr. Whitgrave's house, and that he desired me to come thither to him.

That night Richard Penderell and I went to Mr. Whitgrave's. Here I spoke with my lord Wilmot, and sent him away to Colonel Lanes, about five or six miles off, to see what means could be found for my escaping towards London; who told my lord, after some consultation thereon, that he had a sister that had a very fair pretence for going hard by Bristol to a cousin of her's, that was married to one Mr. Norton, who lived beyond Bristol, on the Somersetshire side, and she might carry me there as her man, and from Bristol I might find shipping to get out of England.

So the next night I went away to Col. Lanes, where I changed my clothes into a little better habit, like a serving man, being a kind of grey cloth suit, and the next day Mrs. Lane and I took our journey towards Bristol, resolving to lie at a place called Long Marston, in the vale of Evesham.

But we had not gone two hours on our way, but the mare I rode on cast a shoe, so we were forced to ride to get another shoe at a scattering village, and as I was holding my horse's foot, I asked the smith what news? he told me there was no news since that good news of the beating those rogues the Scotts.

I asked him were there none of the English taken that joined with the Scots? he answered, That he did not hear that that rogue Charles Stuart was taken, but some of the others were taken, but not Charles Stuart.

I told him that if that rogue was taken, he deserved to be hanged more than all the rest, for bringing in the Scots. Upon which he said, I spoke like an honest man; and so we parted.

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The next night we lay at Cirencester, and so from thence to Mr. Norton's house, beyond Bristol, where, as soon as ever I came, Mrs. Lane called the butler of the house (a very honest fellow, whose name was Pope, and served a groom of my bed-chamber, when I was a boy at Richmond) and bad him take care of William Jackson, (for that was my name) as having been lately sick of an ague, whereof she said I was still weak, and not yet recovered; and the truth was, my late fatigues, and want of meat had indeed made me look a little pale.

The next morning as we arose pretty early, having a pretty good stomach, and went to the buttery hatch to get my breakfast, where I found Pope and two or three other men in the room, and we all fell to eating bread and butter, to which he gave us very good ale and sack, and as I was sitting there, there was one that looked like a country fellow, sat just by me, who talking, gave so particular an account of the battle of Worcester to the rest of the company, that I concluded he must be one of Cromwell's soldiers; I asked him, how he came to give so good an account of that battle; he told me he was in the king's regiment.

I asked him what kind of a man I was, to which he answered, by describing exactly both my cloaths and my horse; and looking upon me, he told me that the king was at least three fingers taller than I, upon which I made what haste I could out of the buttery, for fear he should indeed know me.

So Pope and I went into the hall, and just we came into it, Mrs. Norton was coming by through it. Upon which I, plucking off my hat, and standing with it in my hand as she passed by, I observed, just as I was putting it off, that Pope looked very earnestly in my face. But I took no notice of it, but put on my hat again and went away, walking out of the house into the fields.

I had not been out half an hour, but coming back I went up into the chamber where I lay, and just as I came thither, Mr. Lasels came to me, and in a little trouble said, what shall we do, I am afraid Pope knows you, for he says very positively to me that it is you; but I have denied it.

Upon which I asked him whether he was an honest man or not, when he answered me, that he knew him to be so honest a fellow that he durst trust him with his life; I thought it better to trust him than go away leaving that suspicion upon him, and thereupon I sent for Pope, and told him that I was glad to meet him there, and would trust him with my life as an old acquaintance; upon which, being a discreet fellow, he asked what I intended to do, for, (says he) I am extremely happy to know you, otherwise you might run great danger in this house; for though my master and

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mistress are good people, yet there are at this time one or two in it that are very great rogues, and I think I can be useful to you in any thing you will command me; upon which I told him my design of getting a ship (if possible) at Bristol, and to that end bade him go that very day immediately to Bristol, to see if there was any ships going either to Spain or France, that I might get a passage away in.

So after Pope had been at Bristol to enquire for a ship, but could hear of none ready to depart beyond sea sooner than above a month, which was too long for me to stay thereabouts, I betook myself to the advising afresh with my lord Wilmot and Pope, what was to be done, and the latter telling me that there lived at Trent, within two miles of Sherbourne, Frank Windham, the knight marshal's brother, who being my old acquaintance and a very honest man, I resolved to get to his house; but the night before we were to go away, we had a misfortune that might have done us some prejudice; for Mrs. Norton, who was big with child, fell into labour, and miscarried of a dead child, and was very ill, so that we could not tell how in the world to find an excuse for Mrs. Lane to leave her cousin in that condition; and indeed it was not safe to stay any longer there, where there was so great a resort of disaffected and idle people.

At length consulting with Mr. Lassells, I thought the best way would be to counterfeit a letter from her father's house, old Mr. Lane's, to tell her, that her father was extremely ill, and command her to come away immediately, for fear she should not find him alive, which letter Pope delivered so well, while they were all at supper, and Mrs. Lane playing her part so dexterously, that all believed old Mr. Lane to be in great danger, and gave his daughter the excuse to go away with me the next morning early.

When we came to Trent, my lord Wilmot advised with Frank Windham, whether he had any acquaintance at any sea-port town upon the coast of Dorset, or Devonshire. Frank Windham, went himself to Lyme, and spoke with a merchant there, to hire a ship for my transportation, being forced to acquaint him that it was I that was to be carried out. The merchant undertook it and accordingly hired a vessel for France, appointing a day for my coming to Lyme to embark, and according we set out, and to cover the matter the better, I rode before a cousin of Frank Windham's, a Mrs. Judith Connesby, I still going by the name of William Jackson: membered that one day during my stay at Trent, I hearing the bells ring, and seeing a company got together in the church-yard, I sent down the maid of the house, who knew me, to enquire what was the matter; who returning, told me, that there was a rogue, a trooper, come out of Cromwell's army, that

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was telling the people that he had killed me, and that that was my buff coat which he had then on. Upon which, most of the village being fanaticks, they were ringing the bells and making a bon-fire for joy of it.

This merchant having appointed us to come to Lyme, we, viz. myself, lord Wilmot, Frank Windham, Mrs. Connesby, and a servant of Frank Windham's, were directed from him to a little village hard by Lyme, the vessel being to come out of the cobb at Lyme, and come to a little creek that was just by this village, whither we went, and to send their boat on shore to take us in at the said creek, and carry us over to France; the wind being then very good at north.

So we sat up that night, expecting the ship to come out, but she failed us. At last we resolved to go to a place on the road to London called Bridport, about four miles from Lyme, and here stay till my lord Wilmot should bring us news whether the vessel could be had the next night or not, and the reason of last night's failure.

So Frank Windham, Mrs. Connesby, and I went in the morning on horseback away to Bridport, and just as we came into the town, I could see the streets full of red coats (Cromwell's soldiers), being a regiment of Colonel Haynes's, 1500 men, going to embark to take Jersey. At which Frank Windham was very much troubled, and asked me what I would do; I told him, we must go impudently into the best inn in the town, and take a chamber there, because we should otherwise miss my lord Wilmot, in case we went away any where else, and that would be very inconvenient both to him and me.

So we rode directly into the best inn of the place, and found the yard full of soldiers. I alighted, and taking the horse, thought it the best way to go blundering in amongst them, and lead them through the middle of the soldiers into the stable, which I did, and they were very angry with me for my rudeness.

As soon as we had dined, my Lord Wilmot came into the town from Lyme, but went to another inn. Upon which we rode out of the town, as if we had gone upon the road for London, and when we had got two miles off, my lord Wilmot overtook us, he having observed, while in town, where we were, and told us he believed the ship might be ready next night, but that there had been some mistake betwixt him and the master of the ship.

I went away to a widow gentlewoman's house, one Mrs. Hyde, some four or five miles from Salisbury, where I came into the house just as it was almost dark, with Robin Phillips only, not intending at first to make myself known. But just as I alighted

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at the door, Mrs. Hyde knew me, though she never had seen me but once in her life before, and that was with the king my father, in the army, when we marched by Salisbury some years before in the time of the war; but she being a discreet woman, took no notice at that time of me.

Immediately after supper, Mrs. Hyde told me she had a very safe place to hide me in, till we knew whether our ship was ready or not, but she said, it was not safe to trust any body but herself and sister, and therefore advised me to take my horse the next morning, and make as if I quitted the house, and return again about night, for she would order it so that all her servants, and every body should be out of the house but herself and sister, whose name I remember not.

So Robin Philips and I took our horses, and went as far as Stonehenge, and there we stayed looking upon the stones some time, and returned back again to Heale, the place where Mrs. Hyde lived, about the time appointed, where I went up into the hiding hole, that was very convenient and safe, and staid there all alone some four or five days, sometimes Mrs. Hyde, and sometimes her sister, bringing me meat.

After four or five days stay, Robin Philips came to the house, and acquainted me that a ship was ready provided for me at Shoreham, by Colonel Gunter, upon which, at two o'clock in the morning, I went out of the house by a back way, and with Robin Philips met Colonel Gunter and my lord Wilmot together, some fourteen or fifteen miles off, on our way towards Shoreham, and were to lodge that night at a place called Hambleton, seven miles from Portsmouth, because it was too long a journey to go in one day to Shoreham; and here we lay at a house of one Mr. Symonds, where I was not to be known, I being still in the same grey cloth suit as a serving man, though the master of the house was a very honest poor man, who while we were at supper came and taking a stool, sat down with us, where his brother-in-law, Col. Gunter, talking very fullingly concerning Cromwell and all his party, he went and whispered his brother-in-law in the ear, and asked whether I was not some round-headed rogue's son, for I looked very suspiciously.

Upon which Colonel Gunter answering for me, that he might trust his life in my hands, he came and took me by the hand, and drinking a good glass of beer to me, called me brother round-head.

The next day we went to a place called Brighton or Brighthelmstone, where we were to meet the master of the ship, as thinking it more convenient to meet there than just at Shoreham, where the ship was. I observed that the master of the vessel looked very hard at me, and as soon as we had supped, called the merchant

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aside, and the master told him that he had not dealt fair with him, for though he had given him a very good price for the carrying over that gentleman, yet he had not been clear with him; for (says he), he is the king, as I very well know him to be so; upon which the merchant denying it, saying, that he was mistaken, the master answered, I know him very well, for he took my ship, together with other fishing vessels at Brighthelmstone, in the year 1648; which was when I commanded the king, my father's fleet, and I very kindly let them go again: but (says he) be not troubled at it, for I think I do God and my country good service in preserving the king, and by the grace of God I will venture my life and all for him, and set him safe on shore, if I can, in France.

Upon which the merchant came and told me what had passed between them, and therefore found myself under the necessity of trusting him, but I took no kind of notice of it presently to him, but thinking it convenient not to let him go home, lest he should be asking advice of his wife, or any one else, we kept him in the inn, and sat up all night drinking beer, and taking tobacco with him.

About four o'clock in the morning, myself and the company before named, went towards Shoreham, taking the master of the ship with us on horseback, behind one of our company, and came to the vessel side, which was not above sixty tons; but it being low water, and the vessel lying dry, I and my lord Wilmot got up a ladder into her, and went and lay down in the little cabin till the tide came to fetch us off; but I was no sooner got into the ship and lay down upon the bed, but the master came into me, fell down upon his knees and kissed my hand, telling me, that he knew me very well, and that he would venture life, and all that he had in the world, to set me safe down in France.

So about seven o'clock in the morning, it being high water, we went out of the port, but the master being bound for Pool, laden with sea-coal, because he would not have it seen from Shoreham that he did not go his intended voyage, but stood all the day with a very easy sail towards the Isle of Wight, only my lord Wilmot and myself of my company on board, and as we were sailing, the master came to me, and desired me to persuade his men to use their endeavour (with me) to get him to set us on shore in France, the better to cover him from any suspicion thereof, upon which I sent to the men, which were four and a boy, and told them truly that we were two merchants that had had some misfortunes, and were a little in debt; that we had some money owing us at Rouen, in France, and were afraid of being arrested in England; that if they would persuade the master, (the wind being very fair) to

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give us a trip over to Dieppe, or one of the ports near Rouen, they would oblige us very much; and with that I gave them twenty shillings to drink, upon which they undertook to second me if I would propose it to their master.

So I went to the master and told him our condition, and that if he would give us a trip over to France, we would give him a consideration for it; upon which he counterfeited a difficulty, saying, it would hinder his voyage, but his men, as they had promised, joined their persuasions to our's, and at last he yielded to set us over.

So about five o'clock in the afternoon, as we were in sight of the isle of Wight, we stood directly for the coast of France, the wind being then full north, and the next morning, a little before day, we saw the coast; but the tide failing us, and the wind coming about to the south-west, we were forced to come to an anchor within two miles of the shore, till the tide of flood was done: we found ourselves just before an harbour in France called Feckham, and just as the tide of ebb was made, espied a ship to leward of us, which by her nimble working, I suspected to be an Ostend privateer. The master also himself, had the same opinion of her. For fear it should tempt him to sail back again with us for the coast of England, I and my lord Wilmot went both on shore in the cock-boat, and going up into the town of Feckham, staid there all day to provide horses for Rouen; the vessel which so affrighted us proved only a French sloop.

The next day we got to Rouen, to an inn, one of the best in the town, in the fish-market, where they made a difficulty to receive us, taking us by our clothes to be some thieves, or persons that had been doing some very ill thing, until Mr. Sanbourne, a merchant for whom I sent, came and answered for us.

One particular more there is observable in relation to this our passage into France, that the vessel that brought us over had no sooner landed me, and I had given them a pass for fear of meeting with any of our Jersey frigates, that the wind turned so happily for her, as to carry her directly over to Pool, without it being known that she had ever been upon the coast of France.

We staid at Rouen one day, to provide ourselves better clothes, and give notice to the queen, my mother, who was then at Paris, of my being safely landed; after which, setting out in a hired coach, I was met by my mother with coaches, short of Paris, and by her conducted thither, where I safely arrived.

Note by King Charles: I could never get my lord Wilmot to put on any disguise, he saying that he should look frightfully in it, and therefore did not put on any.

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CARDS WITH A STRANGER

Now enters the accomplice, I thought

BY CLARE HOLMES CHAPMAN

I WAS once in a very good card school with three acrobats: Mr. and Mrs. Terry Cahoon and their son Willard.

They were working at the time in Lazzard's Circus, which was touring the southern counties. I was temporary secretary to Mr. Lazzard, a job which suited me extremely well. The hours were not long and I got time for a little writing; I was also thinking over what my future career was going to be. And I had time to be entertained by the Cahoon family—a pleasure and an instruction which I was destined never to forget.

Why they ever bothered with me in their card games, I shall never know. I am not a natural card player; my memory is poor, and I make mistakes. But they overrode my ineptitude with their natural gaiety and kindliness; under their tuition I rapidly improved, until I could at least not disgrace my partner in a game. Bridge, solo, pontoon, European and even Asiatic games filled their spare time between acts. I even learnt how to play bezique in Chinese.

And not only were they expert at card games, they were equally talented at tricks and sleight of hand. They could make an ace disappear, and deal from the bottom of the pack with the best. But they never at any time used this knowledge to cheat or win money from the unwary. It was just a matter of humour and skill to them. They were scrupulously honest and honourable; and as well as being brilliant at their job, were the most intelligent and companionable people I have ever met.

At the end of the summer I made my decision about my career, and left the circus. It was several years before I saw any of the Cahoons again.

Then, some time later, I was having lunch in the dining-car of a train on my way to London. I was feeling rather pleased with the way things had turned out: I had just had my first novel published, had received an advance, and was on my way to my

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first real holiday for years, for which I had allotted myself the magnificent sum of twenty pounds.

There were four of us seated at that dining-table in the train, two obviously businessmen, and one rather maiden lady. At the end of the meal the waiter removed the cloth, and then, before any of us could move, a surprising thing happened. The man opposite to me whipped out a pack of cards, said, "Anyone for a game?" and dealt the cards like lightning round the table.

We all looked at the cards. No doubt we all thought the same thing: the folly of playing cards with a stranger. But so quick had been the assault, so adroit the movement, so great was the fascination of that shiny heap of pasteboard before us, that we all picked up our hands and surveyed what we had got.

Then began one of the strangest half hours I have ever spent. The stakes were moderate, but the man who had dealt the cards began to cheat. And to cheat in our favour, of course. So that we all won a small sum of money.

We all made gratified murmurs—all except myself, for I knew that this was the moment of maximum danger to the inexperienced. I sat, watching with interest, wondering what was going to happen next.

The man who had dealt the cards and who was sitting next to the aisle of the dining-car, murmured an excuse, got up from the table, and walked away.

And now enters the accomplice, I thought. The accomplice to take advantage of our confidence and clear out the rest of us. He will be a really poor player to begin with, who suddenly at the end . . .

I awaited his arrival, watching the door of the dining-car. Judge of my surprise when I suddenly saw, approaching us down the aisle, the dapper and confident figure of Willard Cahoon.

Now I was not to know until some time later, that this was pure coincidence. That Willard had happened to be passing through the car and, seeing a vacant place and a pile of cards waiting, had not been able to resist gathering them up into his hands. But I did not know this then.

All I saw was my old friend sitting down, murmuring some pleasantries, and thumbing through the most dubious hand of cards I had ever encountered. I must say he started slightly when he met my eye.

We neither of us betrayed knowledge of the other, and in about twenty minutes the game was over. Willard had won. I did once deal myself two aces—by the skin of my teeth—just to show Willard I still had my hand in, but Willard ignored it. He simply used all the expertise he possessed and led us like lambs

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to the slaughter. At the end we all paid up, and the lady and the other man got up and went away.

Willard and I were alone.

I looked at Willard. He had not altered at all. He was elegantly but quietly dressed in a suit of silver grey. His cuff-links appeared to be gold, his hair was beautifully cut, his skin shone with soap and toilet water. But my look was not approving.

To think you have sunk to this, Willard, I thought. After your education, and all your father and mother taught you. You, who have been top of your profession and have toured the world with the best circuses. You have come down to this: card-sharping on trains with a second-rate accomplice, robbing elderly ladies and defenceless women of their spare cash. You should be ashamed.

But before I could say anything, Willard spoke first.

"I am extremely sorry to find you in this plight," he said soberly. "After the promise you showed in the circus, to find you doing this! Working the trains with a clumsy partner. Cheating businessmen and dear old ladies. I am deeply surprised at you."

I stared at him with amazed horror, quite speechless. I also thought, This then is his defence. To accuse me before I can accuse him. It seemed to me conclusive proof of his guilt.

Willard then buried his face in his hands, and his shoulders shook as if with weeping. I was stricken with pity and grief. I put out my hand and touched his arm.

"Don't be upset, Willard," I said. "There must be some way out for you. We will think of something."

And then, like a blow on the back of the neck, it hit me. Like a blanket wet with seawater it descended upon me; like a blight it cut short my earlier satisfaction with life. I knew what the way out was. I remembered my holiday money and knew what I would have to do.

I thought of the kindness of the Cahoon family, their affection for me, their high standards in life, the parents' pride in their son Willard. I felt I owed it to all of them to help Willard. After all, what was a holiday compared to . . .? Twenty pounds could put a man on his feet. Twenty pounds could change the direction of one's life. If he could take this chance and use it, he could rehabilitate himself. I wished I had never got on the train.

When Willard left the dining-car for a moment I took out the money—four five-pound notes—and put it in an envelope with a scrawled note. I put the envelope into the pocket of his overcoat which lay on the seat before me.

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"Are you busy when we reach London?" he said on his return. "I'm going straight to London Airport. Why not come with me? We could have a meal and . . ."

He obviously thinks I must be down to my last penny, I thought. At King's Cross, to my surprise, he took a taxi to the airport.

On the way we tried to talk naturally of old times: Mr. Lazzard, the circus, his mother and father now living in a nice little bungalow at Cleveleys.

I began to estimate if I had the fare home. After all, I thought, what does a holiday matter? I shall have enjoyed the day out. I can start work again without distractions and . . .

"Cheer up," he said suddenly, at the entrance to the airport. "Don't be upset about things." He hadn't said any more about a meal. Obviously he couldn't afford it. I didn't embarrass him by mentioning it. I was surprised to find he was actually flying somewhere. I thought he'd gone about a job until I realised—of course, he would be working the planes!

Amid the voices, noises, the comings and goings of the airport lounge, he began to speak. He spoke as one who has considered something, and has at last, painfully, made up his mind.

"I'm flying to the States. I'm working there." He stopped, struggled with himself, and spoke again, forcing himself on. "I've enlarged my scope. I—would you like a job in my show? I'm looking for a girl for the Disappearing Ariel-Lady. And Cutting a Spacewoman in Half. I could coach you. You'd look quite nice in a black velvet box," he said half-heartedly.

I shook my head, too dazed to speak.

He tried to conceal his relief, and continued earnestly, "But give up what you're doing. Why didn't you stick to your writing and try to make a career for yourself? You might have, you know. We all had great hopes of you in the circus."

He shook my hand and hastened away as the impersonal voice called his flight number. I watched him go.

"Did you get his autograph?" said a voice beside me. I turned to see a young teenager in jeans.

"No. Should I have?"

"You should. That was Willard Cahoon, currently tops in the States. He has his own radio and television shows. Stage too. Does oldfashioned stuff, but with a new gimmick. Golly, he must be nearly a millionaire."

Sadly I watched him enter the aircraft, taking my holiday money with him.

I turned away. I didn't even have my bus fare. I'd have to walk to King's Cross.

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Then I realised that Willard had pushed a small envelope into my hands before he had left me. I began to open it.

Inside was his address at Radio City—in case I should change my mind about a job, he said. But I was not looking at that. I was looking at the end of the note, which said,

To give you a fresh start. Good luck! And get working.

And clipped to the paper were twenty beautiful new one-pound notes.

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Up in Smoke

What a blessing this smoking is! perhaps the greatest that we owe to the discovery of America.

ARTHUR HELPS

Tobacchanal

Tobacco is a dirty weed:
I like it.
It satisfies no normal need:
I like it.
It makes you thin, it makes you lean,
It takes the hair right off your bean,
It's the worst darn stuff I've ever seen:
I like it.

GRAHAM LEE HEMMINGER

Burning Question

" My goodness, you certainly have gone to town, haven't you? " She went forward and fingered the sheet and blankets like one shown material in a shop. " But this doesn't look like a burn; it looks as if it's been cut with something."

" Yes, I . . . cut the burnt bits off with a razor-blade. I thought it would look better than just leaving it burnt."

" Why on earth did you do that? "

" I can't really explain. I just thought it would look better."

" Mm. And did all this come from one cigarette? "

" That I don't know. Probably."

" Well, you must have been pretty far gone not to . . . And the table too. And the rug. You know, I don't know that I ought to be a party to all this." She grinned, which made her look almost ludicrously healthy, and revealed at the same time that her front teeth were slightly irregular. For some reason this was more disturbing to his equanimity than regularity could possibly have been. He began to think he'd noticed quite enough things about her now, thank you. Then she drew herself up and pressed her lips together, seeming to consider. " I think

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the best thing would be to remake the bed with all this mess at the bottom, out of sight. We can put the blanket that's only scorched—this one—on top; it'll probably be almost all right on the side that's underneath now. What about that? It's a pity there isn't an eiderdown."

"Yes. Sounds all right to me, that. They're bound to find it when they strip the bed, though, aren't they?"

"Yes, but they probably won't connect it with smoking, especially after what you did with your razor-blade. And after all, you wouldn't have put your head right down the bottom of the bed to smoke, would you?"

KINGSLEY AMIS, *Lucky Jim*

Pipe Dream

The clouds of smoke were rising fast,
As through a college room there passed
A youth, who bore, 'spite sage advice,
A "baccy"-pouch, with strange device,
"Tobacco smoke!"

His brow was sad; his eye beneath
Glared on a pipe, laid in its sheath,
And in his ears there ever rung
The accents of the donor's tongue,
"Tobacco smoke!"

R. C.

Sucking Up!

I must tell you—and try not to conceive an insular prejudice against me for saying so—that you had better learn to smoke, if you can. You will find yourself an alien in the harîms without it, and be a wet blanket to other women.

ISABEL BURTON, *The Inner Life of Syria, Palestine, and the Holy Land*, 1875

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Perfect Puff

We talked about tobacco and the difficulties of getting it.
Quilp smoking an old black pipe,
Sucking at the ashes of ashes.
I gave him two cigarettes and his well-being broke into blossom
Just like a wrinkled old gum putting a white head
High into a singing cloud of bees.
" This is good tobacco," he said.

W. HART-SMITH, *Black Stockman*

Nocturne to Nicotine

. . . Drowsing, half asleep, watching the moon play patterns on the floor, she wondered what other scent it was that mingled itself with the lilac, a stronger, harsher smell, something whose name eluded her. It stung her nostrils even now, as she turned her head on the pillow. It seemed to come from the drawer beneath the table, and stretching out her arm she opened the drawer, and looked inside. There was a book there, and a jar of tobacco. It was the tobacco she had smelt of course.

She picked up the jar, the stuff was brown and strong and freshly cut.

Surely William had not the audacity to sleep in her bed, to lie there, smoking, looking at her portrait? That was a little too much, that was really unforgivable. There was something so personal about this tobacco, so very unlike William, that surely she must be mistaken—and yet—if William had lived here at Navron, for a year, alone?

DAPHNE DU MAURIER, *Frenchman's Creek*

Smoke Rings

When Life was all a summer day,
And I was under twenty,
Three loves were scattered in my way—
And three at once are plenty.
Three hearts, if offered with a grace,
One thinks not of refusing.
The task in this especial case
Was only that of choosing.
I knew not which to make my pet—
My pipe, cigar, or cigarette.

HENRY S. LEIGH, *A Town Garland*

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UNTAMED LAND

Scott guessed she was near breaking-point—
how near he didn't know

BY EDWARD LINDALL

THERE was a deep bitterness in Scott Bramley's eyes as he looked out at the watery bog that was now the valley. A bog with an overlay of flattened yellow grass, and a rain curtain so thick it seemed to stand up from the ground.

Here, in this drowned and unnamed valley, he had come to the end of his three-year marriage drift with Norma. And it hurt him cruelly.

He watched her now as she knelt on the sapling and brush floor of the hut he had made, bending over Eddie Smith, their young Australian pilot, looking again for signs of returning consciousness.

"Anything?" he asked mechanically, expecting nothing.

Norma turned her head and Scott saw a glint of fear in her grey-green eyes. It had been a long, nerve-rasping-vigil since their plane had crashed two days ago, watching a sorely injured man and the endless, fat monsoonal rain.

"He's breathing better," she said. "More evenly . . . perhaps a little deeper."

Scott twisted round to look at Eddie Smith's white face, with the skin stretched tight and thin, as though the great lump across the forehead had pulled the skin up like a rubber mask from round the neck and jaw. He was a charter pilot whom Scott knew casually from other hirings. Young, skilled, and countrywise, but not proof against a stalling engine and a grass-concealed rock. Now he was injured and badly needed the hospital they wouldn't see until the valley dried, in at least a week and maybe longer. But Scott was unwilling to admit that much to Norma. Time enough to worry her when it was inevitable.

"Skull like a buffalo," he grunted. "He'll be all right."

He turned his eyes back to scouting round the valley, and the bitterness in them spread to twist his big sun-leathered face. He was a tall man, this Bramley, with sinew and muscle to clothe the height. He had the build of a football player, and had been

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one in college, before he had found geology and got the smell of oil. He was thirty-five.

The sun texture on his face was borrowed from the many lands in which he had lent his American know-how in the search for oil . . . Persia, the Philippines, South America, Somaliland, and now, for the past twelve months, here in this rugged, untamed Kimberleys district of north-west Australia.

His eyes were a searcher's eyes. Not from their colour—brown—but from the crowsfeet at their corners, their appearance of always conning the next hill, always reaching out to collect data and bring it back for the mind to examine, tabulate, and file.

But now there was nothing in them but the bitterness. They roamed the valley with hostility, deriding its wide and almost treeless floor, its rugged hillside softly etched inside the sheets of rain, the crumpled foreground heap of metal that had been a plane.

He had hoped the flight, a charter survey to check some geological formations, would have shown Norma some of the beauty of this untamed land. That, in doing so, it would perhaps have helped knit up the unravelling of their marriage. All it had done was subject her to the terror of a crash, the nerve-testing anxiety of caring for a badly injured man, and the physical discomfort of being lost and coldly weathered in.

"Scott," she said now, "they'll find us, won't they?"

He brought his eyes back. "Sure," he said carefully. "We were flying to plan. They'll run a radio check on the cattle stations, the missions. Then, soon as the rain stops, they'll come out for us."

"But will they find us?" Her voice was not quite steady.

"Relax," he said. "We've talked this out before."

"I'm not worried for myself." She squared slim shoulders. "I'm worried for this poor boy."

Scott waved a hand impatiently, because he was worried too. "Worrying won't help him," he said flatly. "He'll be all right. These local boys are tough."

His brown eyes had a curious blankness, a patina of defence about them as they looked at her. She was beautiful by any standards, he thought, grey-green eyes and tawny hair, and features that somehow managed to combine pride and shyness. A jagged scratch down her left cheek emphasised the pallor of her face. It was not an unhealthy pallor, but an indoor creaminess of texture, a softness that he suspected would remain no matter how much it was overlaid with painting by the sun.

The expensive blouse she was wearing with tailored slacks had a huge rent at the right shoulder, exposing smooth soft flesh.

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Her lovely hands were grubby and one long scarlet fingernail was broken. The rest were chipped. But she still managed to look impeccable, something to do with the delicate balance of her head, the way she moved her hands.

He glanced down involuntarily at his own big roughened hands and thought, in a fleeting moment of awkwardness, to hide them. They had not lived enough together for him to be entirely at his ease. He loved her now as strongly, and as vainly, as he had throughout their separateness, but there was too much constraint between them for him to tell her anything about it. And anyway he knew it was not important. Somaliland and its aftermath had shown that.

She had gone out with him to Somaliland, fresh and glowing from their Boston wedding. He had warned her against the heat, the flies, the driving sand blasts of the summer, and she had been blithely certain of her ability to contend with them all. But she was urban-raised, in quiet, good home comfort. She had no conception of the malevolence he had attempted to describe. The country had beaten her in just under four weeks. She had gone defeated home and settled for a secretary's job which should have been for the remainder of the summer, but which had extended, on one pretext or another, for all the span of time.

And when Somaliland was finished, she didn't trust the Kimberleys despite his urgings, his enthusiastic letters . . . She wouldn't trust anything again, she said, that hadn't got four walls, a refrigerator, and air-conditioning.

Then four days ago she had climbed from a bush pilot's plane at the one-horse town of Hallam's Well, walked into his room in the only hotel, and announced she had come on a look-see visit. She had made much of the casualness of it all. But he had sensed the over-acting, and the truth that this was not just a visit but a test, a last throw of the dice. He pulled his lips down now in a twist of irony. The test had failed almost before it had begun—shattered in a crash from which the two of them had emerged amazingly unscathed, ending up in a sea of mud that now had snared them both.

"Isn't there something we can do?" Norma was drumming a small fist with intense deliberation on one knee. "Do we just sit here and wait? Day after day? Hour after hour?"

"It'll clear some time," Scott said.

"And when it does?" Her voice was terse. "Will anything be able to land out there?"

Scott eyed her steadily, knowing now he had underrated her intelligence, annoyed with himself for having done so. "I doubt it very much," he said. "A helicopter could. But there aren't

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any round about. This is what the Aussies call the never-never land."

She stood up abruptly, ducking her head only just in time to avoid bumping the low roof of the hut. "Well, why are we waiting here—cooped up—doing nothing?"

Scott looked up, and the sight of her standing there, flushed with indignation, graceful in her rumpled, muddy clothes, triggered a quick, unreasoning anger. "You could start walking," he said roughly. "Koongabba Mission is the nearest. About a hundred and sixty miles of swamp and six flooded rivers due north."

"As a joke that stinks," she snapped.

"I wasn't trying to be funny," Scott said harshly. He clambered stiffly to his feet, stiff in body, mind, and temper. "I'm going to get more fuel."

He took an empty can and sloshed down to the wreckage of the plane, cold in his working-clothes of boots, long khaki trousers, a thin khaki shirt, and old sweater. They hadn't needed warm clothes in the heated comfort of the little plane, wouldn't have needed them on the ground but for this cold rain front that had sneaked in from the Timor Sea.

He was almost glad of the discomfort. Eddie Smith's limp form and pallid face were with him like an accusation, a challenge to give help, and there was nothing to be done. They had given him the only blankets carried in the plane, which kept him warm and left them cold. But there was little more than negative help in that. Eddie Smith was getting a raw deal all round.

Back in the hut, Scott poured petrol into a can of dry earth, lighted it, and boiled water to heat beans and make black coffee for their evening meal. He handed Norma her food in the opened tin, placed a mug of coffee on the ground.

"It'll make you warmer," he said, "if nothing else."

She was sitting with her arms crossed up and over her chest, hands clasped on the shoulders. "Scott," she said, "why don't we burn a fire all night? I know the fuel is low—that it's leaked away—but use what's left. At least we can be warm until it's gone."

Scott's brown eyes shafted at her. But he held back the sharp rebuke when he saw her big-eyed misery. He shook his head. "And what if Eddie Smith wakes up and needs warm food, warm drinks?"

She coloured, and he was glad he had swallowed the rebuke. "I'm sorry." Her voice was light. "I didn't think."

Several times in the night that followed Scott wanted to take her in his arms. He could feel her shivering, lying against his

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back for warmth. But it had been too long since they had been in sympathy with each other for him to offer comfort. He lay in the long cold night, cursing the forces that had made them drift apart, cursing the crash, and the irony of this vagrant, late monsoon. If there had ever been a chance of bringing her round to his way of life, it had been surely killed by now.

Next morning early the sun sprang into their world of mud, and showed even more clearly that no plane could land. So when the search plane's engine throbbed down the valley a few hours later, Scott ran out and fired a flare without enthusiasm. The plane swept over the steep hillside behind them, stood on one wing as it circled the black smoke column. It was one of those little high-wing jobs, skipping around the sky like a gnat, and Scott could see the observer grinning down at them.

"They've found us," Norma called excitedly.

"Yeah," Scott grunted sourly. "So what?"

The words knocked her excitement cold. "Of course," she whispered bleakly. "So what?"

The plane came swooping low. A piece of coloured cloth fell out, spread itself, and slanted to the ground some fifty yards away.

Scott ran to it, stumbling and slipping in the mud. He had to play this game of eagerness for the sake of the searching crew. He didn't know the men. They'd be from some cattle station round about. Most of them had planes. He didn't know them and they couldn't do any good for Eddie Smith, but decency demanded some sort of show.

In the old tradition of rescued men, he thought bitterly, waving a tattered shirt and crying brokenly with joy . . . Is the war over yet, Mac? Is my wife all right? He broke off the sardonic game then . . . The question was too near the bone.

Was his wife all right? Was she his wife any longer? Was she anything?

He fumbled the message open and began reading its pencil scrawl:

Indicate situation regarding third member of your party.

Lie down if dead, sit if needs immediate medical aid, stand if O.K. to wait until valley dry. Joe Farrar.

Scott recognised the signature. Farrar was manager of the Hergott Springs cattle run. He had met him once in the bar at Hallam's Well. A wartime Aussie air force man and a fine pilot. And again, so what? Then he heard the plane returning.

"Sit down," he barked. "Quick. Where you are."

He dropped squelching into the mud beside Norma as the

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little plane roared over. It waggled its wings, and when it rode down the valley again another message blossomed in a red bandanna.

Estimate able land early tomorrow on gravel plateau sighted in next valley. Your route straight up from present camp through gap in rock wall at screes. Will drop blankets, clothing, brandy, water, food other side of gap to save you carrying. Tough climb en route. Easy on other side.

Wave if making attempt.

Scott read the message twice, although he needed to only once. The plateau was the only way to give their injured man a chance for life. There was only one possible decision. He looked up slowly, eyes hard and lips pressed tight, looking at Norma, calculating her worth in terms of strength and courage.

The climb would be tough work for two strong men; sheer hell for a woman reared in urban luxury. It was hard luck for him that she was all the help available. It was going to be hard luck for her too, he thought grimly. But it could be her farewell gesture to the Kimberleys and his way of life. Something to remember them by shudderingly amid the cocktail chatter of the coming years.

He handed her the message. The plane was poised, like a pinned insect, on the far side of the valley.

"When the plane comes, wave," he told her. "Wave like mad. Both of us wave, because in the next twenty-four hours we're going to work together. You and me."

He made a stretcher of two straight saplings crisscrossed with short branches, all held together with electrical wire taken from the wreck, equipped with shoulder harness fashioned from the webbing safety-belts. He tied on tins of food and a water canteen, in case they failed to reach the gap. Then he wrapped Eddie Smith tightly in his blankets and tied him down so he wouldn't fall off each time they slipped. The search plane, having watched their preparations, had flown off to make its drops across the hill and return to Hallam's Well.

They snatched a quick, cold meal, and climbed into the afternoon with half-hour stints, flopping on the oozy ground to rest, looking down through thin trees to the sunny, steam-bath valley. Scott carried the rear end of the stretcher because it was the heavier. Eight feet above and ahead of him he watched Norma struggling, round-shouldered with the weight and the angle of the climb, feet scrabbling like clawed hands to get a purchase on small stones and roots—anything to make it easier for the legs and back and arms.

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On the steeper sections higher up, where the rock formations thrust out from the earth in flights of steps, she had to ease out of the shoulder harness and climb backwards. Then he could see the strain in the white intensity of her face, the corded muscles of her soft neck. But she made no requests for halts and he offered none. He wanted to make the gap before night fell.

By late afternoon they had pushed and clambered up beyond the treeline, and the sun burnt down on them from a naked sky. They had been cold, and now they were too hot. The rocks were hot to the touch, and a cruel glare bounced off them to burn the eyes. It was punishing work, and Norma was swaying by the time they reached the first of Farrar's screes. Scott called an unscheduled halt; a deep breath before the assault. He untied the water canteen from the stretcher and offered it to her.

"Only a mouthful," he warned. "Hold it, swill it round your mouth before you swallow."

"I know," she said, and gave him the glimmer of a smile. "I heard them warn a man in a desert picture once. Gary Cooper—maybe Harpo Marx—I can't remember."

Scott looked at her then, quickly and closely, hearing the suggestion of humour in her voice, amazed to find it there. Her clothes, the stylish blouse and tailored slacks, were plastered with red-brown mud and torn in a dozen places. Her hair, the splendid tawny hair, was matted with mud and sweat. Her face was streaked with both, and the grey-green eyes with their long lashes and soft eloquence were red with strain, dull with fatigue. But she looked more beautiful to him then than she had ever appeared in the well-dressed and coiffured past. It hurt more than ever to think that he was losing her. His wide, big-featured face settled into cutting planes. Sharp-edged. Raw.

He swung away from her and used his eyes instead to plot a course up the steep approaches to the great rock ramparts that capped the hill. What he saw did nothing to relax the grimness of his face. The approaches, as steep as seventy degrees, were festooned with wide stone screes—fragmented pieces of the parent rock, broken and spewed out over thousands of years—now forming a hazard that on the muddy earth would slide fearsomely beneath their feet.

Manhandling a heavy stretcher across them was going to be torture for the nerves and muscles. Negotiating them would be like swimming swift rivers. Rivers of stones. And the penalty for a stumble could be a terrifying roll, right down to the treeline a hundred yards below and, likely as not, a torrent of stones to batter and engulf.

Scott silently cursed Joe Farrar, the pilot who had given them

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this course. "Well, let's have some action," he said harshly. "No skirmishing. We'll get in there and fight."

Norma swallowed. "I can fight."

"Good," Scott said. "You're going to get your chance."

He took the canteen from her, drank briefly, and then tied it back in place. "I'll take the lead." He rubbed his hands in the dirt to remove any slipperiness, and shrugged into the shoulder straps. "I'm going to aim uphill and I'll be moving fast. Keep up. If you fall, keep scrambling for the other side. Any way you can. Whatever you do, keep moving."

They took that scree without much trouble. And the next. On the third, Norma stumbled badly twice, scraping her knuckles painfully each time but keeping her hold on the stretcher. Scott didn't pause an instant when she fell the third time, but kept on for the other side, with Norma dragging along on hands and knees as she tried desperately to regain her feet. Panting, sweating, they reached a tongue of solid earth lower down than planned. As they flopped to rest Scott guessed she was near breaking-point. How near he didn't know.

He watched her trying to tie a mud-stained handkerchief round the bleeding knuckles of one hand. The handkerchief was her own. It was too small and too dirty to be of use. She was doing it all with a dull persistence, doggedly, and as he watched he realised she was further from breaking-point than he had thought. He hadn't reckoned on this strength that was showing in her now. This fighting spirit.

He pulled out his well-washed khaki shirt, tore two strips from it, and gently took her hands. "You're doing fine," he said. "Just fine."

"Thanks." Her voice was a whisper in the thin, warm air.

Scott glanced up at her, and it was then that he saw the gap in the rock wall high above them, out beyond her left shoulder and opening from the next scree. His eyes narrowed, and the growing warmth left his face. The scree was huge and very steep. It was probably not much worse than those they had just traversed but he didn't believe it. Not yet. There was still time for the doublecross. He gave her back the bandaged hands.

"There's our gap," he said tautly. "Let's move."

He levered himself to his feet, hating to drive her on now, but knowing it would be worse if they stayed and she had time to think.

"We'll go up this tongue of land as far as we can, then climb diagonally across the scree."

He glanced down. Norma was staring at Eddie Smith.

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He grasped her shoulder. "Get up. We're on our way."

She lifted her face, and he saw excitement sparkling in her weary eyes, parting the clenched lips. "He opened his eyes," she said urgently. "Scott. He looked straight at me."

Scott dropped to his knees beside the stretcher. There was a tinge of red in Eddie Smith's pallid cheeks, and when Scott spoke his name the eyelids flickered. Scott looked up slowly at Norma and then past her to the last scree and the gap. "We're going to win," he said.

She nodded once. "We won't let him down."

They rushed the scree as he had planned, striking more directly upwards than formerly because they could not afford to drift down with the tide of shifting stones. It was shoulder-breaking work. Scott drove ahead, with shoulders hunched and great thighs straining, dragging Norma and the stretcher after him with desperate strength. They had to make the gap first time, he knew. Norma would not be able to find the energy for a second try.

They made it . . . stumbling out of the scree on to a narrow ledge in the cool, wind-funnel greyness of the gap. For the second time, Scott cursed the easy optimism of cattleman Joe Farrar, whose quick birdman's view had taken no account of ground conditions.

From the air maybe the floor of the gap appeared smooth like a stone pavement. From where Scott and Norma crouched with their injured pilot above the dizzy fall of the big scree, it was a jumble of man-high boulders. This was the doublecross. It always came, Scott thought. But when he stood up he could see above and beyond the boulders a wedge of pale sunlit air, a misty view of hilltops on the far side of the next valley.

"When you're ready, we'll push on," he panted. "We'll be out of daylight soon."

Norma gave him a small grimace. Her eyes were big in the pale oval of her face. "Climbing I can stand. I'm in practice. Don't ask me to run, that's all."

"No promises." Scott's mouth twitched briefly in a grin. He jerked his head towards the first big boulder. "Climb up and I'll push the stretcher to you. Then you hold it while I climb."

There were two routes up the boulder. A line of weathered footholds up the front, and a three-foot space between it and the gap wall. Norma used the footholds, but Scott, in his turn, crabbed up the space between the wall and boulder because he reckoned it would be quicker. It was a little harder, too, and as he finished the climb he was more tired than he had thought.

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"O.K.," he said, "you shin down and I'll pass the stretcher to you. Prop it against the boulder. Then we'll tackle the next one the same way."

He stooped to take his grip on the stretcher and, even as his hands touched wood and Norma moved away, his right foot slipped on the smooth, curved surface of the boulder. He fell heavily and his hands flew wide. The tiredness left him instantly as the shock flowed in. For what seemed minutes he hung there, flailing to save himself. But there was no handhold, nothing but air and shiny boulder.

He shot back down into the space up which he had climbed. He struck hard on his side, and the breath belched out of him.

Six feet above him, like some crude toboggan, he saw the stretcher start to move, sliding its rough tree runners out over the boulder's curve. What breath there was left in him stuck in his throat. Fear writhed despairingly in his empty stomach.

Then he heard himself yelling, although what it was he didn't know. All his attention was fixed on what was about to happen. He saw it all, understood it, with a strange, slow-motion clarity. The stretcher with its tethered burden was about to slither and strike this wall above him, then bounce over the edge of the gap and hurtle down the mountainside in a torrent of engulfing stones.

He tried to scramble up, blindly, desperately, knowing even as he tried that anything he did would be too late. Then there was a noise and a flurry of movement above him. He saw Norma jump in, wedge her back against the rock wall, and brace her legs against the boulder to block the runaway. The stretcher crashed across her shins with a sickening thud. She screamed, but she didn't move her legs. The only movement was the quick dart forward of her hands to steady the stretcher and stop its sideways slide.

"Hold on," Scott yelled. "I'm coming."

Hauling himself out, he clawed his way up the boulder with fear-driven strength, grabbed the stretcher with both hands, and dragged it back to the top.

As he crouched there with it, he saw the pain on Norma's face and felt it like a sullen, hurting blow. Her eyes were burning, her soft mouth was twisted, and beneath the dirt the whiteness of her face was almost transparent.

"Norma," he said hoarsely. "Norma."

"I'm all right," she gasped.

He moistened his lips that had suddenly gone dry. "I daren't leave this stretcher."

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" I'm all right." She moved her legs as though to ease them. " Just waiting until I get my breath."

He wanted then to say the things that were surging up in him, apologies for his secret thoughts, proud things, praise . . . Not just for this one act, but for her long courage throughout the climb. But it was not yet the time . . . Instead, he said, harshly because there was a hard lump in his throat, " Soon as you're ready, we'll push on. A few minutes and we're through."

She levered herself away from the rock wall and scrambled, limping, up to him. Her body was weaving slightly, like a fighter's out on his feet. They didn't talk, but passed the stretcher across that boulder and two more. And then they were standing in the other doorway of the gap, with a graceful slope of timbered grassland sweeping away at their feet.

They put the stretcher down. The stony plateau they were seeking was less than half a mile away.

It looked, Scott thought, as though it had slipped from the hillside in some remotely distant age, and then been scoured down to the bones. It was more a huge, natural benchcut than a plateau. It appeared as though—and then he stopped. He was talking geology to himself because he was suddenly afraid to think or talk of anything else—of what he had to talk about. He turned stiffly and unwillingly.

" I'll go and look for that stuff Farrar dropped," he said, with careful detail. " You stay and rest. We'll camp here the night."

As he finished saying that, he knew it was insufficient and all wrong. Norma was lying on her side upon the ground, head on one outflung arm, eyes closed, and her face collapsed without a sign of tenderness, only the angularity of strain. As he spoke, she rolled over and put her head down on crossed arms, and the tears started. They flowed in a great rolling tide and nothing helped them. No convulsive shakings or heavings of her body. They poured out from opened floodgates.

She sat up slowly, swivelling round, and sat crosslegged to face out over the valley, dark green and purple now under the colding mists of night.

" It's beautiful," she said. " Really beautiful."

" It gets you," Scott said, and his lips went stiff. His voice was bitter. It was beautiful as all the land was beautiful, and he hated it because she was going to leave him there.

She shook her head slowly. She didn't attempt to brush her eyes, her tangled hair, or mop the marks of tear-rain from her face. " You know something? This was the first time I've ever been faced with anything like this . . . something I *had* to do."

Scott heard a strange, deep note in her voice that had never

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been there before. He turned towards her, something within him recognising the note, touching chords of music, flicking on the switches of awareness. She was gazing out over the spreading valley to the tumbled hills beyond.

"This was the first time we've ever done anything together," she said softly. "Anything important." She paused. "The first time you've ever asked anything of me."

Scott looked at her. Then he nodded slowly.

"I've found out what I wanted," she went on. "What I came out here to find." She stood up, weary but steady. "I'm not flying out, or anywhere, until we can go together. Better for the plane to take off with only Eddie." She lifted her shoulders in a shrug that wasn't true. "You could always order me to stay."

Scott stared at her for a long moment, feeling hammer beats of excitement, seeing a softness in her that was not from tears. It was in her eyes and on her face, shining luminously through the dirt and tiredness, the marks of struggle. He moved towards her. All his awkwardness, his old uncertainties, were gone.

Their eyes were locked together. The past, the old and the immediate, were all wiped out and there was only this present and its future. Close against her ear, his lips said softly, "I order you to stay."

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ANY OLD IRON?

Iron, cold iron, as Kipling says, is the master of us all, so whether you're handier with the branding iron or the ironing board, strike while the iron is hot and tackle our quiz; no iron curtains in this department, the solutions are on page 99

1. *In which of his books did Kipling make the remark quoted above?*
2. *Who was: a. the Iron Duke? b. the Iron Maiden? c. the Man in the Iron Mask?*
3. *What connection with iron have Chalybeate Waters? Where in England are they to be found?*
4. *When was the Iron Age?*
5. *Of which of Shakespeare's characters was it said, "Iron may hold with her, but never lutes"? This is an easy one to guess if you don't know.*
6. *Who was Ironside of Archangel?*
7. *Sportsmen—what's an iron?*
8. *Whose soul did the iron enter into?*

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THE MAN WHO HATED GLASSES

He saw nothing but scorn in those wonderful eyes

BY JOHN DAVIES

THE trouble with young George West was that he had a pronounced inferiority complex.

He thought of himself as an undersized little runt when he wasn't anything of the sort; he was of average height and very well built.

He thought he was lacking in personality and easily pushed around, but he wasn't; he just had a nature so equable and easy-going that the firmness underneath it didn't often show.

He thought he was a failure because he was only a bank teller and not a top executive. But he wasn't really doing badly at all, because he was still only twenty-five.

But, one way and another, George was convinced that he was a thoroughly poor specimen. And now, on top of everything else, he was having difficulty totting up his figures.

The simple reason for that was, he needed glasses. That wouldn't have bothered most men too much but, George being George, it upset him badly. He was convinced he was fast becoming decrepit. He saw himself rapidly turning into a dismal little fellow with pebble lenses, a full set of dentures, a toupee, and a hearing aid.

And then Miss Pamela Palmer came to work in the bank as the manager's secretary. Miss Palmer had violet-blue eyes, hair like new-minted gold, and the figure of a teenage goddess.

In ten seconds flat from first setting eyes on her, George was hopelessly in love with her.

That only made everything worse. He couldn't hope that the adorable Miss Palmer would ever waste so much as a glance on so inferior a person as himself. And when she did, he wished she hadn't, because he saw nothing but scorn in those wonderful eyes.

If he'd only had the spectacles he needed he might have seen something quite different, because the look in Miss Palmer's

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eyes wasn't scorn at all. In fact she thought George was rather nice. Certainly the nicest man in the bank. Perhaps even the nicest man she had ever met.

But George, of course, didn't know that. Sunk in increasing gloom as his eyes seemed to get daily worse and worse, he stuck doggedly to his counter, exchanging money and polite conversation with the customers, all the time terribly conscious of the heavenly vision which every now and then flitted out of the manager's office or back again. Sometimes he wondered how old Craxton managed to get any work done at all, with *her* in there.

Still George's eyes got worse, until he was crouching over his work like a purblind hunchback—or so it seemed to him. And the climax came when a customer—an optician who wasn't above drumming up a little business when he got the chance—suggested that perhaps George needed spectacles, at least for close work. It was then that George knew he had simply got to do something about it.

A month later poor George was near despair. He had stubbornly refused to resort to the spectacles which were the obvious answer to his trouble. And now his sight was markedly worse. Most of the time there seemed to be a steamy mist between him and the rest of the world, and his eyes were red-rimmed, as though he had been weeping. He came very near to weeping too, when he thought what a sorry sight he must present to his beloved Pam's gloriously unimpaired gaze.

And then there came the day of the raid. George happened to be alone on the counter when the bandit came in.

He wasn't a gun- but a grocery-bandit. He had a small paper funnel full of pepper in his hand. He flung the pepper in George's face, grabbed all the money he could reach, and headed for the door.

But, unfortunately for the thief, George didn't seem much affected by the pepper. He wasn't blinded by it as he should have been. In fact, he wasn't incommoded by it at all. He vaulted the counter and brought the bandit down with a flying tackle just as the man reached the door. The bandit's head struck the doorpost and he ceased to take any further interest in the proceedings. And only then did the pepper get home to George. He sat up and delivered himself of a mighty sneeze.

Young George West is a very different man now. His old, crippling inferiority complex has completely disappeared. It could scarcely have done otherwise, seeing that he is now engaged to marry Miss Pamela Palmer. No man who had succeeded in

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winning such a pearl among women could fail to have a very proper opinion of himself.

He has solved the problem of his eyesight too, by taking to wearing heavy tortoiseshell glasses. He feels they give a fitting sense of presence to one who is now chief-cashier-elect.

And he is quite sure he could never have got on with those contact lenses anyway.

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SOLUTION to LEISURE PLEASURE 3 in November ARGOSY

1. *Demon seaman*
2. *Shoddy body*
3. *Persian version*
4. *Fissile missile*
5. *Tireless wireless*
6. *Witty ditty*
7. *Laughter after*
8. *Arty party*
9. *Ailing grayling*
10. *Frantic antic*
11. *Rumly comely*
12. *Fleeces nieces*
13. *Wiser miser*
14. *Flustered mustard*
15. *Cautious Portius*
16. *Viscous whiskers*
17. *Blighty nightie*
18. *Moral quarrel*
19. *Deeper sleeper*
20. *Mother's brothers*

SOLUTIONS to ANY OLD IRON? on page 96

1. *Rewards and Fairies.*
2. *a. the Duke of Wellington; b. a medieval instrument of torture; c. an unknown prisoner in the Bastille from 1698 to 1703: Dumas wrote a novel about him, making him the illegitimate brother of Louis XIV.*
3. *They are mineral springs containing iron, found at Harrogate and Leamington.*
4. *In Europe, the thousand years preceding the birth of Christ.*
5. *Kate, in The Taming of the Shrew.*
6. *Field-Marshal Ironside, Commander of the Allied forces at Archangel in World War I.*
7. *A golfer's club, a little shorter than a cleek.*
8. *Joseph's.*

SOLUTION to ARGOSY CROSSWORD on page 144

Across. 1, *Potato peelers.* 8, *Nazi.* 9, *Run.* 10, *Piracy.* 11, *Chatterley.* 13, *Cube.* 14, *Arrest.* 16, *Grisette.* 19, *Mnemonic.* 22, *Osprey.* 25, *Evil.* 26, *Self-seeker.* 27, *Scathe.* 28, *Dad.* 29, *Twin.* 30, *Shooting stars.*

Down. 1, *Poacher.* 2, *Thistle.* 3, *Turkestan.* 4, *Pin.* 5, *Empty.* 6, *Earache.* 7, *Sackbut.* 12, *Logical.* 15, *Rye.* 17, *Ironsides.* 18, *Tor.* 20, *Novices.* 21, *Mulatto.* 23, *Plectra.* 24, *Enemies.* 26, *Sheet.* 28, *Don.*

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He calls so clear, "Rememberest thou?"

RUDYARD KIPLING, *Stalky & Co.*

I remember, I remember
The roses, red and white,
The violets, and the lily-cups,
Those flowers made of light!
The lilacs where the robin built,
And where my brother set
The laburnum on his birthday,—
The tree is living yet!

THOMAS HOOD, *Past and Present*

In Kilcrusha Woods

"Do you remember a picnic, Caro—the summer before you were married—up there in Kilcrusha Woods? . . . You and Alice O'Leary—do you remember, the two of you went and got lost and there was terrible excitement . . . She was a lovely creature. I'll never forget the pair you made in your muslin frocks that sunny day . . . I remember that when we found the two of you that evening, you looked so excited, we were all quite sure you'd been up to mischief. Were you, I wonder?"

"We were, Ted." She laughed tenderly back to her youth.

"What was it?" he coaxed.

"It's all so long ago and silly—you won't laugh if I tell you?"

He shook his head gravely.

"We had a secret appointment that day with two officers at the other side of the wood. Lord, weren't we rash, Alice and I!" . . .

"Did they make love to you?"

"Oh, well, yes! We thought they did, anyhow—such innocents we were!—and we thought ourselves wicked, Alice and I!"

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"And what happened that day of the picnic?"

"Well, we walked about the woods together. My lieutenant—no, you're not going to get his name—vowed tremendous vows, I remember, and I was in the seventh heaven. He was a handsome creature!"

"You were in love, Caro?"

"I was in love, I think. Ah, yes, I know. I was in love."

KATE O'BRIEN, *Without My Cloak*

When Sam goes back in memory
It is to where the sea
Breaks on the shingle, emerald-green,
In white foam, endlessly . . .

WALTER DE LA MARE, *Sam*

Nil Nisi Bonum

"Are you married?"

"No."

"Why not?"

"My fiancée died."

"Oh, how sad—what was she like?"

"Very pretty."

"Prettier than me?"

"Much prettier. Very correct." . . .

A deep melancholy settled on them both. Linda saw too clearly that she could not hope to compete with a fiancée who was not only prettier and more correct than she was, but also dead. It seemed most unfair. Had she remained alive, her prettiness would surely, after fifteen years of marriage, have faded away, her correctness have become a bore; dead, she was embalmed for ever in her youth, her beauty, and her gentillesse.

NANCY MITFORD, *The Pursuit of Love*

Total Recall

Remember how a face
reminds you how a look
reminds you how a place
reminds you how a book
reminds you how a leaf
reminds you how a tree
reminds you how it always
used to be?

ROSIE LEE

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FEAR IS THE KEY

by

ALISTAIR MACLEAN

Posing as a wanted man on the run, I had got myself into an outfit led by Vyland and Royale, a couple of high-class thugs. They were on to a big job, involving millions: their interest was focused on General Ruthven's oil-rig in the Gulf of Mexico. My technical skill was needed to repair the bathyscaphe near the rig, sabotaged by their former engineer, since eliminated.

Another victim had been Jablonsky, a cop who, unknown to them, had been working with me. I had persuaded Kennerley, the general's chauffeur, and Mary Ruthven to help. Though out of character, the general was somehow involved. I suspected that he was on to me. But I was determined nothing should stop me now. I had a very personal interest in seeing this assignment through.

Out on the oil-rig, I had been sent down to work on the bathyscaphe . . .

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AT HALF PAST SIX I left the bathyscaphe. I was glad to leave. If you have no work to occupy you—and apart from a task lasting exactly one minute I hadn't done a stroke that afternoon—the interior of a bathyscaphe has singularly little to offer in the way of entertainment and relaxation. I left Cibatti to screw down the hatch in the floor of the pillar and climbed up the iron rungs to the compartment at the top. Royale was there, alone.

"Finished, Talbot?" he asked me.

"All I can do down there. I need paper, pencil, the book of instructions, and if I'm right—and I think I am—I can have those engines going within five minutes of getting down there again. Where's Vyland?"

"The general called for him five minutes ago." Good old General, dead on the dot. "They've gone off somewhere—I don't know where."

"It doesn't matter. This'll only take me half an hour at the most. You can tell him we'll be ready to go shortly after seven. Now I want some paper and peace and quiet for my calculations."

"I'll get Cibatti to fetch some paper."

"If you imagine I'm going to work with Cibatti giving me the cold cod eye all the time you're mistaken." I thought a moment. "We passed a regular office a few yards along the passage on the way back here. It was open. Proper desk and everything, all the paper and rules I need."

Royale shrugged and stood aside to let me pass. As I went out Cibatti emerged through the trunking from the pillar and before we'd gone ten feet along the passage I heard the solid thudding home of a bolt, the turning of a key in the lock behind us. Cibatti took his keeper-of-the-castle duties on the oil-rig very seriously.

Halfway along the passage an opened door led into a small, fairly comfortably furnished room. I looked over my shoulder at Royale, saw his nod and went in.

Royale looked round the room the way Royale would always look round a room. It was impossible to imagine Royale sitting down anywhere with his back to a door, overlooked by a window, or with light in his eyes.

In this case, however, he seemed to be examining the room more with an eye to its qualifications as a prison, and what he saw must have satisfied him: apart from the doorway, the only other point of egress was through the plate-glass window that overlooked the sea. He picked a chair directly under the central overhead light, lit a cigarette and sat there quietly, his expressionless face in shadow. He was no more than six feet from me. He had nothing in his hands and he could have had that little black gun out and two little holes drilled through me before I covered half the distance towards his chair. Besides, violence wasn't on the cards just then: not, at least, for me.

I spent ten minutes in scribbling down figures on a sheet of paper, fiddling with a slide rule, consulting a wiring diagram, and

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getting nowhere at all. I didn't conceal the fact that I was getting nowhere at all. I clicked my tongue in impatience.

" Not working out as easily as you thought it would, eh? "

I stared at Royale in irritable silence. If he wasn't going to suggest it I would have to, but he saved me the trouble.

" I seem to be distracting you." He rose easily to his feet, glanced at the paper in front of me, picked up his chair with one hand and made for the door. " I'll wait outside."

I said nothing, just nodded briefly. He took the key from the inside of the door, went out into the passage, shut the door and locked it. I got up, crossed to the door on cat feet and waited.

I didn't have to wait long. Within a minute I heard the sound of feet walking briskly along the passage outside, the sound of somebody saying, " Sorry, Mac," in a pronounced and unmistakably American accent and then, almost in the same instant, the solid, faintly hollow-sounding impact of a heavy blow that had me wincing in vicarious suffering. The key turned in the lock, the door opened, and I helped drag a heavy load into the room.

The load was Royale and he was out, cold as a flounder. I hauled him inside while the oilskinned figure who'd lifted him through the door reversed the key and turned it in the lock. At once he started throwing off sou'wester, coat, and leggings, and beneath everything his maroon uniform was as immaculate as ever.

" Not at all bad," I murmured. " Both the sap and the American accent. You'd have fooled me."

" It fooled Royale." Kennerley bent and looked at the already purpling bruise above Royale's temple. " Maybe I hit him too hard." He was as deeply concerned as I would have been had I accidentally trodden on a passing tarantula.

" He'll live. It must have been a long-deferred pleasure for you." I had shed my own coat and was struggling into the oilskins. " Everything fixed? Get the stuff in the workshop? "

" Look, Mr. Talbot," he said reproachfully, " I had three whole hours."

" Fair enough. And if our friend here shows any sign of coming to? "

" I'll just kind of lean on him again," Kennerley said dreamily. I grinned and left. I'd no idea how long the general could detain Vyland on whatever spurious errand he'd called him away, but I suspected it wouldn't be very long.

The wind on the open well-deck shrieked and gusted as powerfully as ever, but its direction had changed and I had to fight my way almost directly against it. It came from the north now and I knew then that the centre of the hurricane must have passed somewhere also to the north of us, curving in on Tampa. It looked as if the wind and the seas might begin to moderate within a few hours. But, right then, the wind was as strong as it had ever been, and on my way across I had my head and shoulders so far hunched into the wind that I was looking back the way I came. I fancied, in the near darkness, that I saw a figure clawing its way

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along the lifeline behind me, but I paid no attention. People were probably using that line all day long.

Arrived at the other side I strode down the long corridor, turned right, stopped to orientate myself and headed in the direction of the broad companionway which led up to the actual drilling deck itself. There were several crew wandering around, one of the open doors I passed gave on to a recreation room full of blue smoke and crowded with men: obviously all work on drilling and the upper deck was stopped by the weather.

Rounding another corner I all but cannoned into a couple of people who seemed to be arguing rather vehemently. Vyland and the general. Vyland broke off to give me a glare as I apologised and continued down the passage. I was certain he couldn't have recognised me, my sou'wester had been pulled right down to my eyes, the high fly-away collar of my oilskin was up to my nose, and, best disguise of all, I had dispensed with my limp, but for all that I had a most uncomfortable sensation between the shoulderblades until I had rounded another corner and was lost to their sight.

I wasn't sure whether this obvious argument between the general and Vyland was a good thing or not. If Vyland had been expostulating over what he regarded as some unnecessary delay, things might get very rough indeed. If he got back to the other side of the rig before I did, I didn't like to think what the consequences would be. So I didn't think about them. I broke into a run, reached the companionway, and went up two steps at a time.

Mary Ruthven, tightly wrapped in a hooded raincoat, was waiting behind the closed doors at the top of the steps. She shrank back and gave a little gasp as I stopped abruptly in front of her and pulled down the collar of my oilskin for a moment to identify myself.

"You!" She stared at me. "You—your bad leg—what's happened to your limp?"

"Never had one. Local colour. Guaranteed to fool the most suspicious. Kennerley told you what I wanted you for?"

"A—a watchdog. To keep guard."

"That's it. I don't want a bullet or a knife in my back in that radio shack. Sorry it had to be you, but there was no one else. Where's the shack?"

"Through the door." She pointed. "About fifty feet that way."

"Come on." I grabbed the door handle, incautiously twisted it open, and if I hadn't had a strong grip on it I'd have been catapulted head over heels to the foot of the stairs. As it was, the hammerblow blast of that shrieking wind smashed both door and myself back against the bulkhead with a force that drove all the breath out of my lungs in an explosive gasp.

For a moment I hung there, bent double against the hurricane force of the wind, whooping painfully as I fought to overcome the sucking effect of the wind and to draw some breath into my aching lungs: then I straightened up and lurched out through the door, pulling Mary beside me.

Twice I tried to heave the door closed, but against the sustained

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pressure of that wind I couldn't even pull it halfway to. I gave it up. They could, and no doubt very shortly would, send up a platoon from below to heave it shut: I had more urgent things to attend to.

It was a nightmare of a night. A dark howling nightmare. Arm-in-arm we lurched and staggered across the deck like a couple of drunks, heading for a square patch of light shining on the deck from a concealed window. We reached a door on the south side, on the near corner and sheltered from the wind, and I was on the point of bending down and having a squint through the keyhole when Mary caught the handle, pushed the door, and walked into a small unlit corridor. Feeling rather foolish, I straightened and followed. She pulled the door softly to.

" The entrance door is at the far end on the right," she whispered. She'd reached both arms up round my neck to murmur in my ear, her voice couldn't have been heard a foot away. " I think there's someone inside."

I stood stock still and listened, with her arms still round my neck. Given a more favourable time I could have stayed there all night.

" No time to play it safe. Stay out in the passage," I murmured. " It'll be all right." I gave her hands a reassuring squeeze as I disengaged them from my neck, reflecting bitterly that Talbot luck was running typically true to form, padded up the passage, opened the door, and walked into the radio room.

For a moment I stood there blinking in the brightness of the light, but not blinking so fast that I couldn't see a big burly character, sitting at the radio table, whirling round in his seat as the door opened. A split second later he sent his seat toppling backward with a crash and leapt to his feet, spinning so as to face me, with a speed remarkable in so big a man. In so very big a man.

He was taller than I was, a good bit wider, heavier and younger: he had that blue-jowled, black-eyed, black-haired, very tough face that you occasionally see in first or second generation Italian-Americans and if he was a radio-man I was the Queen of Sheba.

" What's all the panic about? " I demanded shortly. It was my best American accent and it was terrible. " The boss has a message for you."

" What boss? " he asked softly. A build like a heavyweight champion and a face to match doesn't necessarily mean a mind like a moron, and this boy was no moron. " Let's have a look at your face, Mac."

" What the hell's bitin' you? " I demanded.

I turned down the collar of my coat.

" Is that what you want? "

Just as I heard him spit out the solitary word, " Talbot," I was into a dive and I hit him fair and square in the middle with the point of my left shoulder.

It was like hitting the trunk of a tree, but he wasn't as well anchored as a tree and he went over.

His head and shoulders crashed against the far wall with a crash

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that shook the radio shack to its metal foundations. That should have been that, but it wasn't. I would have sworn that boy didn't even blink. He brought up one knee in a vicious jab that would have been a sad farewell for me had it landed where it had been intended to land. It didn't; it caught me on the chest and upper arm, but even so it had sufficient power behind it to knock me over on one side. The next moment we were rolling across the floor together, punching, kicking, clawing, and gouging. The Marquess of Queensberry wouldn't have liked it at all.

I was under two big disadvantages. The heavy oilskins hampered my movements; and while he was obviously more than willing to turn the entire radio shack into a shambles of broken furniture and fittings, that was the last thing I wanted: everything, literally everything, depended on my keeping that radio intact. And we had both rolled against the radio table now, myself underneath, where I could have a good view of one of the legs splintering and caving in under the combined weight of our bodies against it.

I wasn't feeling any too good by this time; I had just the evidence of my eyes to show me that this lad was only equipped with arms and fists just like anyone else and not a couple of flexible sledgehammers, which was what it felt like, but the sight of that tottering radio table made me desperate. A particularly vicious clubbing blow to the lower ribs didn't make it at all hard for me to gasp out in pain and fall back limply to the floor. While he was taking advantage of my cooperation and time off to wind up his right sledgehammer to drive me through the floor, I brought up my knee and simultaneously chopped him across his exposed neck with the edge of my right hand.

By all the rules he should have gone out like a light, only he had never read any of the rules. He was momentarily dazed—just long enough to let me squirm out from under and roll over and over until I brought up against the half-open doorway. I might have nailed him then, back where we had been, but I wasn't going to take even the chance of touching the few splintered pieces of table leg which were all that kept the transmitter from crashing on to the steel deck.

He was tough, all right. By the time I was on my feet he was on his; shaken, but still on his feet. For a moment I thought he had lost all taste for the hand to hand stuff; the heavy wooden chair he was bringing whistling over his shoulder certainly made it seem so, but when I ducked and heard the chair smash to pieces on the door jamb behind it turned out that this was only his long-range artillery bombardment and that the assault troops were moving in later. Later, in this case, was almost right away, but I managed to avoid his wild flailing bull-rush and whirled round to meet his next charge.

It never came. He was crouching there, facing me, hands pressed against the wall behind him ready to help him in his take-off, when I saw a slender wrist appearing in the doorway behind him, high up. At the end of the wrist was a white-gloved hand and gripped in the hand was a broken chair leg.

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Mary Ruthven hit him as I would have taken long odds that she would hit him—a hesitant experimental tap on the head that wouldn't have dazed a cockroach—but for all that it had the galvanic effect of an electric shock. He whipped his head round to locate the source of this fresh threat and as he did I moved in with two long steps and hit him on the neck with everything I had.

One of the most deadly blows in boxing, it could easily have dislocated his jaw or broken his neck. But he was phenomenally tough. He crashed back against the steel bulkhead and started to slide down towards the floor, eyes unfocused in his head, but even as he slid he made a last despairing effort to fling himself at me and wrap his arms around my legs to bring me down. But his coordination, his timing were gone.

He lay spreadeagled face downwards on the floor, silent and still. I was far from silent myself, my breath was coming in great heaving gasps as if I had just run a mile, and I hadn't even run a hundred yards in years. My arms, my hands, my face were wet with sweat. I got out a handkerchief and rubbed it all over my face, but there was no blood there, and I couldn't feel any bruise. It would have been very difficult to explain away a black eye to Vyland later.

I looked at the girl in the doorway. The hand that still held the chair leg was trembling slightly, her eyes wide, her lips pale.

"Now, just you stand by with your shillelagh there and clout him if he bats an eyelid—"

I turned round—already a precious minute had been lost since I had come into the shack—and found a nice flexible roll of flex. Within a minute I had the radio operator trussed like a chicken ready for the broiler. I passed a slip knot round his neck and tied the end of it to a cupboard handle. There could be some bells or pushes or phones he might try to reach but he'd soon give it up when he found that all he was doing was strangling himself. I gave the matter of a gag only a passing thought: with that great hurricane howling outside nobody below deck would ever hear him.

The radio was a standard aircraft type transmitter; I knew it well and I knew how to operate it. I switched on, tuned in on the wavelength the sheriff had given me through Kennerley, and clamped on a pair of headphones. I wouldn't have long to wait, I knew that: the police were keeping a twenty-four-hour watch on their short-wave receivers. Within three seconds of the end of my call-up sign the headphones crackled. "Police headquarters. Sheriff Prendergast here. Please go ahead."

I threw the transmitter switch from manual to microphone.

"Car 19 reporting." The agreed subterfuge wasn't necessary for identification, every police car in the county had been warned to stay off the air and the sheriff knew it could only be me; but I wouldn't have put it past Vyland's organisation to maintain a permanent listening watch on the police wavelengths. I continued: "Suspect answering to description detained near Ventura crossroads. Shall we bring him in?"

"Negative," the voice crackled. A pause.

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" We've found our man. Please release suspect."

I felt as if someone had given me a million dollars. The sheer mental relief, the depth of satisfaction I experienced then surpassed anything I had ever known.

" Car 19," I said again. Even to myself my voice didn't sound quite steady. " Would you repeat that, please? "

" Release your suspect," Prendergast said slowly and distinctly. " We have found our man. Repeat, we have found—"

The transmitter leapt backwards about two inches, a great jagged hole appeared in the centre of the tuning band, and the radio shack seemed to explode about my ears, so deafening, so shattering was the effect of a heavy gun being fired in that confined space.

I didn't jump more than a couple of foot and after I came down I got to my feet the normal way, but slowly, carefully. I didn't want anyone getting too nervous, and whoever had pulled that stupid trick, unnecessarily smashing the set and tipping off the cops that something had gone wrong, was very nervous indeed. Almost as nervous as I felt as I turned slowly round and saw who my guest was.

It was Royale's stooge, Larry: the smoking Colt was lined up, as nearly as his shaking hand permitted, on a spot somewhere between my eyes. It looked as large as a howitzer. His lank black hair was plastered wetly over his forehead, and the coal-black eye behind that wavering barrel was jerking and burning and crazy. One eye. I couldn't see the other, I couldn't see any part of him except half his face, his gun hand and a left forearm crooked round Mary Ruthven's neck. The rest of him was completely hidden behind the girl. I looked at her reproachfully.

" Fine watchdog you are," I said mildly.

" Shut up! " Larry snarled. " A cop, eh? A john. A dirty crawling doublecrossing screw! " He called me several names, all unprintable, his voice a venomous hiss of hate.

" There's a young lady here, friend," I murmured.

" Lady? A —— tramp." He tightened his grip round her neck as if it gave him pleasure and I guessed he had at some time mistakenly tried to make time with her. " Thought you were clever, Talbot, didn't you? You thought you knew all the answers, you thought you had us all fooled, didn't you, cop? But you didn't have me fooled, Talbot. I've been watching you, I've been following you every second since we came out to the rig." He was jazzed up to the eyebrows, shaking and jumping as if he had St. Vitus' dance, and his voice held all the venomous and vindictive triumph of the consistently ignored and derided nonentity who has been proved right in the end.

" Didn't know that *I* knew you were in cahoots with Kennerley, did you, cop? " he went ranting on. " And with this tramp. I was watching you when you came up from the bathyscaphe ten minutes ago, I saw that smoothtalking chauffeur give it to Royale on the head and—"

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"How did you know it was Kennerley?" I interrupted. "He was dressed up—"

"I listened outside the door, mug! I could have finished you off there and then, but I wanted to see what you were up to. Think *I* care if Royale gets sapped down?" He broke off suddenly and swore as the girl went limp on him. He tried to hold her up but heroin is no substitute for protein when it comes to building muscle and even her slight weight was too much for him. He stood back abruptly and let her collapse heavily on the floor.

I took half a step forward, fists clenched till they hurt, murder in my heart. Larry bared his teeth and grinned at me like a wolf. "Come and get it, copper. Come and get it," he whispered. I looked from him to the floor and back again and my hands slowly unclenched. "Scared, aren't you, copper? Yellow, aren't you, copper? Sweet on her, aren't you, copper? Just like that pansy Kennerley is sweet on her." He laughed, a high falsetto giggle carrying the overtones of madness. "I'm afraid a little accident is going to happen to Kennerley. Who's going to blame me for gunning him down when I see him sapping Royale?"

"All right," I said wearily. "You're a hero and a great detective. Let's go see Vyland and get it over with."

"We're going to get it over with," he nodded. His voice was suddenly very quiet and I think I liked it even less that way. "But you're not going to see Vyland, copper, you're never going to see anyone again. I'm going to kill you, Talbot."

My mouth felt as if someone had gone over it with a roll of high-absorbency blotting-paper. I could feel the slow heavy beat of my heart and the sweat coming on the palms of my hands. He meant every word he said. He was going to squeeze the trigger of that heavy Colt and if he lived to be a hundred nothing would ever give him half so much pleasure again. I managed to keep my voice steady. "So you're going to kill me," I said slowly. "Why?"

"Because I hate your rotten stinking guts, Talbot, that's why," he whispered, a whisper with a shake in it, a horrible sound. "Because you've ridden me and laughed at me from the moment we met: hophead this, junky that. And because I hate cops."

He didn't like me, I could see that. "You're going to let me have it now?" My eye never lifted off that jumping trigger finger. "Hophead," I added softly. I'd nothing to lose.

"What?" His face was a mask of disbelief. He went into a crouch over his gun that would have been laughable in different circumstances.

"Junky," I said distinctly. "You're all doped up so that you don't know what you're doing. What are you going to do with the body?" It was the first time I'd ever thought of myself as a corpse and I didn't care for the feeling very much. "Two of you couldn't lift me out of here and if they find me shot in this cabin they'll know you did it, and then you'll be for the high jump, because they still need my services. You won't be popular, Larry boy."

He nodded cunningly. "I can't shoot you in here, can I?

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We'll have to go outside, won't we, copper? Near the edge, where I can shoot you and shove you into the sea."

"That's it," I agreed. This was macabre, this arrangement for my own tidy disposal, but I wasn't going as crazy as Larry, I was gambling on my last hope. But the gamble was crazy enough.

He poked at Mary with his foot, but she didn't stir. I could feel the hairs rise on the back of my neck. "The dame will keep till I come back. I won't be long, will I, copper? Come on. You first. And don't forget I have a torch and a gun."

He thrust the gun painfully into the small of my back. "Out."

I went out. Urged on by the revolver I moved round the corner of the shack, crouched low, and barrelling forward into that great wind as soon as it struck me. Larry wasn't so prepared; not only was he slightly built but he was standing upright, and the sudden wavering and jerking of the torch beam on the deck by my feet was intimation enough to me that the wind had caught him off-balance. I lowered my head still farther until I was in the position of a hundred yards sprinter in the first two steps of the race and lurched forward into the wind.

Almost at once I realised that I had miscalculated the strength of the wind; I had also forgotten that while a seventy mile an hour wind offers an almost insuperable resistance to a human being it offers relatively none to a heavy lead slug from a Colt with a muzzle velocity of six hundred m.p.h.

I'd got maybe eight yards when the frantically searching torch beam picked me up and steadied on me, and managed to cover perhaps another two before Larry fired.

A mule-kick is nothing compared to the slamming stopping power of a .45. It caught me high up on the left shoulder and spun me round in a complete circle before dropping me in my tracks. But it was this that saved my life; even as I fell I felt the sharp tug on my oilskin collar as another slug passed through it. He was out to kill.

And kill he would if I had remained another couple of seconds on that deck. Again I heard the muffled boom of the Colt—even at ten yards I could hardly hear it over the howling power of that wind—and saw sparks strike off the deck inches from my face. But the sparks gave me hope, it meant that Larry was using full metal-jacketed slugs, the kind cops use for firing through locked doors; they made an awful sight cleaner wound than a mushrooming soft-nose. Maybe it had passed clear through the shoulder.

I was on my feet and running again. I couldn't see where I was running to and I didn't care. A blinding, bulleting gust of rain whistled across the deck and made me shut both eyes tight and I loved it. If I had my eyes shut so had Larry.

Still with my eyes shut I bumped into a metal ladder. I grabbed it to steady myself and before I properly realised what I was doing I was ten feet off the ground and climbing steadily.

It was a wicked, exhausting climb. I was climbing completely one-handed. My left shoulder didn't hurt much, it was still too

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numb for that, but for the moment the entire arm seemed to be paralysed, and every time I released a rung with my right hand and grabbed for the one above, the wind almost pushed me from the ladder. After I'd climbed about forty rungs my right arm and shoulder were beginning to feel as if they were on fire.

I took a breather, hooked my forearm over a rung and looked down. One look was enough. I forgot about the pain and the weariness and started climbing faster than ever.

Larry was down there at the foot of the ladder, flickering his torch in all directions. Even with that bird-brain of his it was only going to be a matter of time until it occurred to him to shine that torch upwards.

It was the longest ladder I had ever climbed. It seemed endless, and I knew now that it must be some part of the drilling derrick, the ladder, I was now almost sure, that led up to the monkey board, that narrow shelf where a man guided the half-ton sections of the drill pipe, as it came from the ground, into the storage racks behind. The only thing I could remember about the monkey board was the cheerless fact that it was devoid of handrails—they would get in the way of the man guiding the heavy drill sections into place.

A jarring vibrating clang as if the iron ladder had been struck by a sledgehammer was Larry's way of announcing that he had caught sight of me. The bullet had struck the rung on which my foot rested and for one bad moment I thought it had gone through my foot. When I realised it hadn't I took another quick look down.

Larry was coming up after me. I couldn't see him, but I could see the torch clutched in one hand making regularly erratic movements as he swarmed his way up the ladder making about three times the speed I was. It wasn't in character, this; Larry could never have been accused of having excess of courage: either he was loaded to the eyes or he was driven by fear—fear that I should escape and Vyland find out that he had been trying to murder me.

I became gradually aware of lightness above and around me. The top of the derrick was still over a hundred feet above where I was. I screwed my eyes almost shut against the stinging lash of the rain, and peered upwards into the murky gloom.

There was a platform not ten feet above my head, with a light shining off feebly to the right. It wasn't much of a light, but enough to let me see something of the dark maze of girders that was the derrick, enough to let me see a dark shadow above and also to the right which looked like some tiny cabin. And then Larry's torch steadied and shone vertically upwards and I saw something that made me feel slightly sick: the platform above was no solid sheet-metal but open grille-work through which a person's every move could be seen: gone were my hopes of waiting till Larry's head appeared above the level of the platform and then kicking it off his shoulders.

I glanced downwards. Larry was no more than ten feet below, and both his gun and his torch were levelled on me, I could see the dull glint of light on the barrel and the dark hole in the middle

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where death hid. One little pull on the trigger finger and that dark hole would be a streaking tongue of fire in the darkness of the night. And then, slowly, I realised that not even Larry was crazy enough to fire, not then. The dead weight of my falling body would have brushed him off that ladder like a fly.

I kept on climbing and reached the top, managing to hook my fingers in the openwork grille and drag myself on to the platform.

Larry was close behind. I moved to one side, past the little cabin at the corner where a lamp on a recessed shelf threw a faint light that was cut off abruptly at waist level, and waited.

Slowly, carefully, his eyes never leaving my face, Larry came over the top and straightened to his feet. I moved farther along the monkey board, slowly. backwards, with my face to Larry. On my right I could dimly make out the big pipe storage racks, on my left the edge of the monkey board, no handrail, just a sheer drop of a hundred feet. Then I stopped. The gallery of the monkey board seemed to run all the way round the outside of the derrick and it would have suited Larry just fine to have me out on the northern edge where, wind or no wind, a good shove—or a .45 slug—might have sent me tumbling direct into the sea.

Larry came close to me. He halted three feet away. He was panting heavily and he had his wolf grin on again. "Keep going, Talbot," he shouted.

I shook my head. "This is as far as I'm going." I hadn't really heard him, the response was purely automatic, I had just seen something that made me feel ice-cold. Mary Ruthven must have been playing possum in the radio shack. There was no mistaking at all that gleaming dark-blonde head that appeared over the top of the ladder and moved up into the light.

You fool, I thought savagely, you crazy little fool. I had no thought for the courage it must have taken to make that climb. I could feel nothing but bitterness and resentment and despair and behind all of those the dim and steadily growing conviction that I'd count the world well lost for Mary Ruthven.

"Get going," Larry shouted again. "Turn round."

"So you can sap me with that gun and then find me lying on the deck beneath, no suspicion of foul play?" She was only two yards away now. "Won't do, Larry boy. Shine your torch on my shoulder. My left shoulder."

"So I did get you, hey, Talbot?" I heard that maniac giggle.

"You got me." She was right behind him now, that great wind had swept away any incautious sound she might have made. Throw your arms round his neck or his legs, I prayed. Or throw your coat over his head. But don't, don't, *don't* go for his gun hand.

She went for his gun hand. She reached round his side and I heard the smack as her right hand closed over his right wrist.

For a moment Larry stood stock still. The very unexpectedness of the shock temporarily petrified him. It petrified his gun hand too—it was still pointing straight at me.

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And it was still levelled at my heart when he made a violent grab for Mary's right wrist with his left hand. A jerk up with his left hand, a jerk down with his right, and his gun hand was free. Then he moved a little to his left, jerked her forward a foot, pinned her against the storage racks to the right, and started to twist her wrist away from him. He knew who he had now and the wolf grin was back on his face and those coal-black eyes and the gun were levelled on me all the time.

For five, maybe ten seconds, they stood there straining. Fear and desperation gave the girl strength she would never normally have had, but Larry too was desperate and he could bring far more leverage to bear. There was a half-stifled sob of pain and despair and she was on her knees before him, then on her side, Larry still holding her wrist. I couldn't see her now, only the sheen of her hair, she was below the level of the faint light cast by the lamp.

I lifted the heel of my right shoe off the ground and started to work my foot out of it with the help of my left foot. It wasn't even a chance.

"Come here, cop," Larry said stonily. "Come here or I'll give the girlfriend's wrist just another little turn and then you can wave her good-bye." He meant it, he knew he would have to kill her anyway. She knew too much.

I moved two steps closer. My heel was out of the right shoe. He thrust the barrel of the Colt hard against my mouth. I twisted my face away, spat blood, and he thrust the revolver at my throat.

"Scared, cop?" he said softly. His voice was no more than a whisper, but I heard it above the voice of that great wind; maybe it was true enough, this business of the abnormally heightened sensitivity of those about to die. And I was about to die.

I was scared right to the depths as I had never been scared before. My shoulder was beginning to hurt badly, and that damned revolver grinding into my throat was sending waves of nausea flooding through me. I drew my right foot back as far as I could without upsetting my balance. My right toe was hooked over the tongue of the shoe.

"You can't do it, Larry," I croaked. The pressure on my larynx was agonising, the gunsight jabbing cruelly into the underside of my chin. "Kill me and they'll never get their millions."

"I'm laughing." He was, too—a horrible maniacal cackle. "See me, cop, I'm laughing. I'd never see any of it anyway. Larry the junky never does. The white stuff, that's all my old man ever gives his ever-loving son."

"Vyland?" I'd known for hours.

"My father. Damn his soul." The gun shifted, pointed at my lower stomach. "So long, cop."

My right foot was already swinging forward, smoothly, accelerating, but unseen to Larry in the darkness.

"I'll say good-bye to him for you," I said. The shoe clattered against the corrugated iron of the little hut even as I spoke.

Larry jerked his head to look over his right shoulder to locate the

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source of this fresh menace. For a split second of time, before he started to swing round again, the back of his left jawbone was exposed to me.

I hit him. I hit him as if he was a satellite and I was going to send him into orbit round the moon. I hit him as if the lives of every last man, woman, and child in the world depended on it. I hit him as I had never hit anyone in my life before, as I knew even as I did it that I could never hit anyone again.

There came a dull muffled snapping noise and the Colt fell from his hands and struck the grille at my feet. For two or three seconds Larry seemed to stand there poised, then, with the unbelievably slow, irrevocable finality of a toppling factory chimney, he fell out into space.

There was no terror-stricken screaming, no wild flailing of arms and legs as he fell to the steel deck a hundred feet below: Larry had been dead, his neck broken, even before he had started to fall.

Eight minutes after Larry had died and exactly twenty minutes after I had left Kennerley and Royale in the cabin I was back there, giving the hurried pre-arranged knock. The door was unlocked, and I passed quickly inside. Kennerley immediately turned the key again while I looked down at Royale, spreadeagled and unconscious on the deck. "How's the patient been?" I inquired. My breath was coming in heaving gasps.

"Restive." Kennerley grinned. "I had to give him another sedative." Then his eyes took me in and the smile slowly faded. "You look bad. You're hurt. Trouble?"

I nodded. "But it's all over now, all taken care of." I was wriggling out of my oilskins as fast as I could and I wasn't liking it at all. "I got through on the radio. Everything is going fine. So far, that is."

"That's wonderful." The words were automatic. Carefully, gently, Kennerley was helping me out of the oilskin, and I heard the quick indrawing of breath as he saw where I'd torn my shirtsleeve off at the shoulder, the red-stained wads of gauze with which Mary had plugged both sides of the wound—the bullet had passed straight through, missing the bone—in the brief minute we'd stopped in the radio shack after we'd come down that ladder again. "My God, that must hurt."

"Not much." Not much it didn't, there were a couple of little men, working on piecetime rates, perched on either side of my shoulder and sawing away with a crosscut as if their lives depended on it.

"You can't carry on like this," Kennerley persisted. "You're losing blood and—"

"You know I've got to do this." I was slipping off the oilskin leggings and had to re-position the gun in my waistband. Kennerley, beginning to dress up in the oilskins himself, saw it.

"Larry's?" I nodded.

"He did the damage?" Another nod. "And Larry?"

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"He won't need any more heroin where he's gone." I struggled painfully into my coat. "I broke his neck."

Kennerley regarded me long and thoughtfully. "You play kind of rough, don't you, Talbot?"

"Not half as rough as you'd have been," I said grimly. "He'd Mary on her hands and knees on the monkey board of the derrick, a hundred feet above the deck . . ."

He stopped in the middle of tying the last button on his oilskin. His eyes were creased with worry. "How—is she all right?"

"She's all right," I said wearily. "You'd better get going, Kennerley."

"That's right," he murmured. "Half an hour, the general said—it's nearly up. You—you're sure she's all right?"

"Sure I'm sure," I said irritably, then at once regretted the irritation. This man I could get to like very much. I grinned at him. "Never yet saw a chauffeur so worried about his employer."

"I'm off," he said. He didn't feel like smiling. He reached for a leather wallet lying beside my papers on the desk and thrust it into an inside pocket. "Mustn't forget this. Unlock the door, will you, and see if the coast is clear?"

I opened the door, saw that it was clear and gave him the nod. He got his hands under Royale's armpits, dragged him through the doorway, and dumped him unceremoniously in the passage outside. Royale was stirring and moaning: he would be coming to any minute now.

Kennerley looked at me for a few moments, as if searching for something to say, then he reached out and tapped me lightly on the good shoulder. "Good luck, Talbot," he murmured. "I wish to God I was coming with you."

"I wish you were," I said feelingly. "Don't worry, it's just about over now." I wasn't even kidding myself, and Kennerley knew it. I nodded to him, went inside and closed the door. I heard Kennerley turn the key in the lock.

Now that I was alone, with nothing to do, the pain struck with redoubled force. The pain and the nausea came to me in alternate waves. I could feel the shores of consciousness advancing and receding. I would have given anything for some injection to kill the pain, something to see me through the next hour or so. I was almost glad when, less than two minutes after Kennerley had left, I heard the sound of approaching footsteps. We had cut things pretty fine. I heard an exclamation, the footsteps broke into a run, and I went and sat behind my desk and picked up a pencil. I adjusted the angle extension lamp on the wall so that it shone directly overhead, throwing my face in deep shadow.

The key scraped harshly in the lock, the door crashed open and bounced off the bulkhead and a thug I'd never seen before, built along the same lines as Cibatti, jumped into the room. He scowled at me, then turned and nodded to someone in the passageway.

Vyland and the general came in half carrying a now conscious Royale. It did my heart good just to look at him as he sat heavily

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in a chair. Between myself a couple of nights ago and Kennerley tonight we'd done a splendid job on him; it promised to be the biggest facial bruise I had ever seen. I sat there and wondered with a kind of detached interest—for I could no longer afford to think of Royale with anything except detachment—whether the bruise would still be there when he went to the electric chair. I rather thought it would.

" You been out of this room this evening, Talbot? " Vyland was rattled and edgy.

" Sure, I dematerialised myself and oozed out through the key-hole." I gazed at Royale with interest. " What's happened to the boyfriend? Derrick fall on him? "

" It wasn't Talbot." Royale pushed away Vyland's supporting hand, fumbled under his coat, and brought out his gun. His tiny deadly little gun, that would always be the first thought in Royale's mind. He broke open the magazine—intact, all the deadly little cupro-nickel shells there. He replaced the gun in his holster and then, almost as an afterthought, he felt in his inside breast-pocket. There were a couple of flickers of his one good eye that a highly imaginative character might have interpreted as emotions of dismay, then relief, as he said to Vyland, " My wallet. It's gone."

" Your wallet? " There was no mistaking Vyland's feeling, it was one of pure relief. " A hit-and-run thief! "

" Your wallet! On my rig? An outrage, a damnable outrage! " The old boy's moustache was waffling to and fro. " I'll have a search—"

" You can save yourself the trouble, General," I interrupted dryly. " The culprit's got the money safely in his pants pocket and the wallet's at the bottom of the sea. Besides, anyone who takes money away from Royale deserves a medal."

" You talk too much, friend," Vyland said coldly. He looked at me in a thoughtful way I didn't like at all and went on softly, " It could have been a cover-up, a red herring; maybe Royale was knocked out for some other reason altogether. A reason *you* might know something about, Talbot."

I felt cold. Vyland was nobody's fool and I hadn't looked for this. If they got suspicious and started searching me and found either Larry's gun or the wound—and they would be bound to find both—then this was definitely Talbot's farewell appearance. Next moment I felt colder still. Royale said, " Maybe it *was* a plant," rose groggily to his feet, crossed over to my desk, and stared down at the papers in front of me.

This was it. I remembered now the far too carefully casual glance Royale had given the papers as he had left the room. I hadn't added a single letter or figure since; it would be all the proof that Royale would ever want. I kept looking at his face, not daring to glance down at the papers, wondering how many bullets Royale could pump into me before I could even start dragging Larry's cannon from my waistband. And then, incredulously, I heard Royale speak.

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" We're barking up the wrong tree. Talbot's in the clear. He's been working, pretty well non-stop, I should say."

I glanced at the papers in front of me. Where I'd left half a page of scribbled figures and letters there were now two and a half pages. They had been written with the same pen and it would have taken a pretty close look to see that they hadn't been written by the same hand—and it was upside down to Royale. The scribbled nonsense was as meaningless as my own had been, but it was enough, it was more than enough, it was my passport to life, given me by Kennerley. I wished I had met him months ago.

" O.K. So it's somebody short of cash." Vyland was satisfied. " How did you make out, Talbot? We're getting pushed for time."

" No worry," I assured him. " All worked out. Guaranteed. Five minutes buttoning up down in the scaphe and we're set to go."

" Excellent." Vyland turned to the thug who had kicked the door open. " The general's daughter and his chauffeur—you'll find them in the general's stateroom. They're to come here at once. Ready, Talbot? "

" Ready." I got to my feet a bit shakily, but compared to Royale I looked positively healthy, and nobody noticed. " I've had a long hard day, Vyland. I could do with something to fortify me before we go below."

" I'll be surprised if Cibatti and his friend haven't enough supplies to stock a bar." Vyland was seeing the end of the road, he was all good humour now. " Come along."

We trooped out into the corridor and along to the room that gave access to the caisson. Vyland had been right, Cibatti and his friend did indeed do themselves well in the liquor line, and by the time I had three stiff fingers of Scotch inside me the two little men sawing with the crosscut on my shoulder had given up the piecework and were back on time rates and I no longer felt like banging my head against the wall. I'd just poured myself another when the door opened and the thug appeared, ushering in Mary and Kennerley.

My heart had been through a lot that night, heavy overtime stuff to which it wasn't accustomed, but it only required one look at Mary and it started doing its handsprings again. My mind wasn't doing handsprings, though; I looked at her face and my mind was filled with thoughts about what I'd like to do to Vyland and Royale.

There were big bluish-dark patches under her eyes, and she looked white and strained and more than a little sick. I'd have taken any odds that that last half hour with me had scared and shaken her as she'd never been scared and shaken before. It had certainly scared and shaken me enough. But neither Vyland nor Royale seemed to notice anything amiss; people forced to associate with them and not scared and shaken would be the exception.

Kennerley didn't look scared and shaken, he didn't look anything at all except the perfect chauffeur. But Royale wasn't any more fooled than I was. He turned to Cibatti and his side-kick and said, " Just go over this bird here, will you, and see that he's not wearing anything that he shouldn't be wearing. He's had the run of the rig

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this afternoon. He might just possibly have picked up a gun."

They searched Kennerley and found nothing. Royale was smart all right, you could have put in your eye all the bets he missed. But he just wasn't smart enough. He should have searched me.

"We don't want to hurry you, Talbot," Vyland said with elaborate sarcasm.

"Right away," I said. I sent down the last of the anaesthetic and turned towards the entrance door to the pillar. Vyland nodded at a mechanism on the table, a simple solenoid switch I'd brought up from the scaphe. "Forgotten something, haven't you?"

"No. We won't be needing that any more."

"Right, on our way. You first . . . Watch them real close, Cibatti."

"I'll watch them, boss." Cibatti would, too. He'd bend his gun over the head of the first person to breathe too deeply.

The descent to the bathyscaphe almost proved too much for me. Before I was halfway down, my shoulder, arm, and neck felt as if they were bathed in a mould of molten lead. Waves of fiery pain were shooting up into my head and there the fire turned to darkness. The pain and the darkness and the nausea all but engulfed me. I descended the last thirty or forty rungs like an automaton.

The platform hatch was opened and we clambered down through the entrance flooding chamber of the bathyscaphe into the steel ball below. I switched on the overhead light and made for the circuit boxes, leaving Vyland to secure the flooding-chamber hatch. Half a minute later he wriggled into the observation chamber and shut the heavy wedge-shaped circular door behind him.

They were both suitably impressed by the profusion and confusion of the wires dangling from the circuit boxes, and if they weren't equally impressed by the speed and efficiency with which, barely consulting my notes, I buttoned them all back in place again, they ought to have been. Fortunately, the circuit boxes were no higher than waist level; my left arm was now so far gone that I could use it only from the elbow downwards.

I screwed home the last lead, shut the box covers, and started to test all the circuits. Vyland watched me impatiently, but I remained unmoved by his anxiety for haste—I was in this bathyscaphe too and I was in no mind to take chances.

I turned on the control rheostats for the two battery-powered engines, turned to Vyland, and pointed at a pair of flickering dials. "The engines. You can hardly hear them in here but they're running just as they should. Ready to go?"

"Yes." He licked his lips. "Ready when you are."

I nodded, turned the valve control to flood the entrance chamber, pointed to the microphone which rested on a bracket at head-height between Royale and myself, and turned the wall-switch to the "on" position. "Maybe you'd like to give the word to blow the air from the retaining rubber ring?"

He gave the necessary order, and replaced the microphone.

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I switched it off and waited.

The bathyscaphe had been rocking gently, through maybe a three or four degree arc in a fore-and-aft line, when suddenly the movement ceased altogether. I glanced at the depth gauge. It had been registering erratically—we were close enough to the surface for it to be affected by the great deep-troughed waves rolling by overhead—but even so there could be no doubt that the average depths of the readings had perceptibly increased.

"We've dropped clear of the leg," I told Vyland. I switched on the vertical searchlight and pointed through the window at our feet. The sandy bottom was now only a fathom away. "What direction? Quick—I don't want to settle in that."

"Straight ahead, just where you're pointing."

I made the interlock switch for the two engines, advanced to half speed, and adjusted the planes to give us the maximum forward lift. It was little enough, not more than two degrees; unlike the lateral rudder, the depth planes on the bathyscaphe gave the bare minimum of control, being quite secondary for the purpose of surfacing and diving. I slowly advanced the engines to maximum.

"Almost due south-east." Vyland was consulting a slip of paper he had brought from his pocket. "Course 222."

"Has the compass been corrected for deviation?"

He consulted his slip of paper again. "Yes. And Bryson said that as long as we took off straight in this direction the metal in the rig's legs wouldn't affect us."

I said nothing.

"Five hundred and twenty metres," Vyland was saying. "From the leg we've left to the plane." The first mention ever of a *plane*. "Horizontal distance, that is. Allowing for the drop to the bottom of the deep, about six twenty metres. Or so Bryson said."

"Where does this deep begin?"

"About two-thirds of the distance from here. At a hundred and forty feet—almost the same depth as the rig is standing in. Then it goes down about thirty degrees to four eighty feet."

I nodded, but said nothing. I didn't feel like conversation, I didn't feel like anything at all. I tried to forget the pain by concentrating on the job on hand.

The tow-rope attaching us to the pillar was, I had discovered, wound round an electrically-driven power drum. But the power was uni-directional only, for reeling in the wire on the return journey. As we were moving just then it was being paid out against a weak spring, carrying with it the insulated phone cable which ran through the centre of the wire, and the number of revolutions made by the drum showed on a counter inside the observation chamber, giving us a fairly accurate idea of the distance covered. It also gave us an idea of our speed. The maximum the bathyscaphe could do was two knots, but even the slight drag offered by the tow-cable paying out behind reduced this to one knot. But it was fast enough. We hadn't far to go.

Royale's one good cold unwinking eye never left me. He watched

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every separate tiny movement and adjustment I made but it was only pure habit; I think his ignorance of the principles and controls of the bathyscaphe was pretty well complete. It must have been: even when I turned the intake control of the carbon dioxide absorption apparatus right down to its minimum operating figure it meant nothing to him.

We were drifting slowly along about ten feet above the floor of the sea, nose tilted slightly upwards by the drag of the wire, our guide rope, dangling down below the observation chamber, just brushing the rock and coral formations. The darkness of the water was absolute, but our two searchlights and the light streaming out through the windows gave us enough to see by. One or two groupers loafed lazily by the windows; a snake-bodied barracuda writhed its lean grey body towards us, thrust its evil head against a side window and stared in unblinkingly.

Exactly ten minutes after we had left, the sea-floor abruptly dropped away beneath us.

"This is it," Vyland said in a low voice. On his smooth face I could make out the faint sheen of sweat. "Take her down, Talbot."

"Later." I shook my head. "If we start descending now that tow-rope we're trailing is going to pull our tail right up. Our searchlights can't shine ahead, only vertically downwards. Want to rupture the forrad gasoline tank?—don't forget the shell of those tanks is only thin sheet metal. It only needs one split tank and we'll have so much negative buoyancy that we can never rise again."

Vyland's face gleamed with sweat. "Do it your way, Talbot."

I did it my way. I kept on course 222° until the tow-wire recorder showed six hundred metres, stopped the engine, and let our slight preponderence of negative buoyancy, which our forward movement and angled planes had so far overcome, take over.

We settled gradually, in a maddeningly deliberate slow motion, the fathometer needle hardly appearing to move. The hanging weight of the tow-wire aft tended to pull us astern, and at every ten fathoms between thirty and seventy I had to ease ahead on the motors and pay out a little more wire.

At exactly seventy-six fathoms our searchlights picked up the bed of the sea. No rock or coral here, just little patches of greyish sand and long black stretches of mud. I started the two motors again, advanced them almost to half speed, trimmed the planes, and began to creep forward. We had to move only five yards.

Bryson's estimate had been almost exactly right; with six two five metres showing on the tow-wire indicator I caught a glimpse of something thrusting up from the bed of the sea, almost out of our line of vision to the left. It was the tail-plane of an aircraft. We had overshot our target to the right; the nose of the plane was pointing back in the direction from which we had come . . .

I put the motors in reverse, started up the tow-wire drum, backed about twenty yards, then came forward again, angling to the left. Arrived at what I judged to be the right spot, I put the motors momentarily into reverse, then cut them out altogether.

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Slowly, surely, the bathyscaphe began to sink: the dangling guide rope touched bottom, but this lessening of weight failed to overcome the slight degree of negative buoyancy as it should have, and the base of the observation chamber sank heavily into the mud.

Only fifteen minutes had elapsed since I'd turned down the intake control of the carbon dioxide absorption unit but already the air in the cabin was growing foul. Neither Vyland nor Royale seemed to be affected; both were absorbed in what could be seen, brightly illuminated by the searchlight, through our forrad window.

I was absorbed in it myself. A hundred times I had wondered how I'd feel, how I'd react when I finally saw, if ever I saw, what was lying half buried in the mud outside. Anger I had expected, anger and fury and horror and heartbreak and maybe more than a little of fear. But there was none of those things in me, not any more. I was aware only of pity and sadness. Maybe my reactions were not what I had expected because my mind was befogged by the swirling mists of pain, but I knew it wasn't that: and it made things no better to know that the pity and the melancholy were no longer for others but for myself; the self-pity of a man irretrievably lost in his loneliness.

The plane had sunk about four feet into the mud. The right wing had vanished—it must have broken off on impact with the water. The left wingtip was gone, but the tail unit was still completely intact, and the fuselage except for the riddled nose, the starred and broken glass that showed how the DC had died.

We were close up to the fuselage, the bow of the bathyscaphe was overhanging the sunken cabin of the plane and the observation chamber no more than six feet distant from those shattered windows and almost on the same level. Behind the smashed windscreens I could see two skeletons: the one in the captain's seat was still upright, and held in position by the seat belt, the one in the co-pilot's seat was bent far over forward and almost out of sight.

"Wonderful, eh, Talbot? Isn't that just something?" Vyland was actually rubbing his hands together. "After all this time—but it's been worth it, it's been worth it! And intact, too! Should be no bother for an experienced salvage man like yourself, eh, Talbot?" He turned away to stare out of the window and gloat.

"It's wonderful." I was surprised at the steadiness, the indifference in my own voice. "It's probably one of the biggest underwater treasures in the western hemisphere. Ten million two hundred and fifty thousand dollars in gold specie, emeralds, and uncut diamonds."

"Yes, sir." Vyland had forgotten he was an urbane top executive. "Ten million two hundred and—" His voice trailed off. "How—how did *you* know that, Talbot?" he whispered.

"I knew it before you ever heard of it, Vyland," I said quietly. Both of them had turned away from the window and were staring at me with a mixture of puzzlement, suspicion, and the beginnings of fear. "You're not quite so smart as the general, I'm afraid.

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Vyland. Neither am I. He caught on to me this morning. I've worked out why. Do *you* know why, Vyland?"

"What are you talking about?" he demanded hoarsely.

"He's smart, is the general," I went on. "He saw when we landed on the rig this morning that I only hid my face until I was sure that a certain person wasn't among the reception committee. That tipped him off to the fact that I wasn't a murderer—if I were I'd have hidden my face from everybody—and it also tipped him off to the fact that I had been out on the rig before and was frightened someone there would recognise me. He was right on both counts—I wasn't a murderer, and I had been out on the rig before. In the very early hours of this morning."

Vyland had nothing to say; the shattering effect of my words, the limitless avenues of dark possibilities they were opening up, had him completely off balance.

"And the general noticed something else," I went on. "He noticed that when you were telling me about this salvage job I never once asked the first, the most obvious question in the world—what was the treasure to be salvaged, what kind of vessel or aircraft the treasure was in, if any. I never once asked one of those questions, did I, Vyland? But you never noticed. General Ruthven knew there could be only one answer—I already knew."

I smiled at him, as near as my aching upper jaw would allow. "You're going to die, Vyland, you're going to die in agony and you're going to use your last breath on earth cursing my name."

Another silence.

"Let me tell you a little story," I went on. "It's not a fairy story but we'll start it with 'Once upon a time.'

"Once upon a time there was a certain country with a very small navy—a couple of destroyers, a frigate, a gunboat. Not much of a navy. So the rulers decided to double it. They were doing pretty well in the petroleum and coffee export markets, and they thought they could afford it. Mind you, they could have spent the money in a hundred more profitable ways but this was a country much given to revolution and the strength of any current government largely depended on the strength of the armed forces under their control. Let's double our navy, they said. *Who* said, Vyland?"

He tried to speak, but only a croak came out.

"They arranged to get a couple of secondhand destroyers from Britain, some frigates, minesweepers and gunboats from the United States. Considering that those secondhand ships were almost brand new, they got them dead cheap: 10,250,000 dollars. But then the snag: there was a state of threatened revolution, civil war and anarchy, the value of currency was tumbling abroad and Britain and the United States, to whom a combined payment was to be made, refused to deliver against their currency. So it was agreed that the payment be made in kind. Some previous government had imported, for industrial purposes, two million dollars' worth of uncut Brazilian diamonds which had never been used. To that was added about two and a half million dollars'

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worth of gold, near enough two tons in twenty-eight-pound ingots: the bulk of the payment, however, was in cut emeralds."

Vyland said nothing. He looked sick.

"And then came the question of transport. It was supposed to have been flown out to Tampa, on its first leg, by an Avianca or Lansa freighter, but all the domestic national airway lines were temporarily grounded at the beginning of May 1958, when the new elections were coming up. Some members of the permanent civil service were desperately anxious to get rid of this money in case it fell into the wrong hands, so they looked around for a foreign-owned freight airline operating only external flights. They picked on the Trans-Carib Air Charter Co. Lloyd's agreed to transfer the insurance. The Trans-Carib freighter filed a false flight plan and took off from Barranquilla, heading for Tampa via the Yucatan Strait.

"There were only four people in that plane, Vyland. There was the pilot, a twin brother of the owner of the Trans-Carib Line. There was the co-pilot who also doubled as navigator, and a woman and small child whom it was thought wiser not to leave behind in case things went wrong at the elections, and the part played by the Trans-Carib in getting the money out of the country was found out.

"They filed a false flight plan, Vyland, but that didn't do them any good at all for one of those noble and high-minded civil servants who had been so anxious to pay the debt to Britain and America was as crooked as they come and a creature of yours. He knew of the true flight plan, and radioed you. You'd everything laid on, hadn't you, Vyland?"

"How do you know all this?" Vyland croaked.

"Because I am—I was—the owner of the Trans-Carib Air Charter Co." I felt unutterably tired; I don't know whether it was because of the pain, or the foul air, or just because of the overwhelming sense of the emptiness of living. "I was grounded at Belize, in British Honduras, at the time, but I managed to pick them up on the radio after they had repaired it. They told me then that someone had tried to blow up the plane, but I know now that it wasn't quite true, all they had tried to do was to wreck the radio, to cut the DC off from the outer world. They almost succeeded—but not quite. You never knew, did you, Vyland, that someone was in radio contact with that plane just before it was shot out of the sky? But I was. Just for two minutes, Vyland." I looked at him slowly. "Two little minutes that mean you die tonight."

Vyland stared at me with sick terror in his eyes. He knew what was coming all right, or thought he knew; he knew now who I was, he knew now what it was to meet a man who had lost everything, a man to whom pity and compassion were no longer even words. Slowly, as if at the expense of great effort and pain, he twisted his head to look at Royale, but there was no security to be found there, for the incredible was happening at last: Royale was afraid.

I half turned and pointed at the shattered cabin of the DC.

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"Take a good look, Vyland," I said quietly. "Take a good look at what you've done and feel proud of yourself. In the captain's seat—that skeleton was once Peter Talbot, my twin brother. The other is Elizabeth Talbot—she was my wife, Vyland. In the back of the plane was John Talbot, my son. He was three and a half years old. I've thought a thousand times about how my little boy died, Vyland. The bullets that killed my wife and brother wouldn't have got him; he'd have been alive till the plane hit the water. I wonder how long it was before the waters closed over him. Can't you see it, Vyland, three years old, screaming . . ."

I looked out at the smashed plane cabin for a long time, or what seemed like a long time, and when I turned away Vyland caught my right arm. I pushed him off and he fell on the duckboard floor, staring up at me with wide, panic-stricken eyes. His mouth was open, and his entire body was trembling. Royale was still in control of himself, but only just.

"I've waited a long time for this, Vyland," I went on. "I've waited two years and four months and I don't believe I've ever thought for five minutes about anything else in all that time.

"I've nothing left to live for, Vyland, you can understand that. I've stopped kidding myself about the point in carrying on living. There's no point now, because all that's kept me going was the promise I made myself, that I'd never rest again till I'd sought out and destroyed the man who had destroyed life for me. That I've done, and there's no more now. I suppose it's kind of fitting. The killers and their victims, all together in the end."

"You're mad," Vyland whispered. "You're mad. What are you saying?"

"Only this. Remember that electrical switch that was left on the table? The one you asked about and I said, 'We won't be needing that any more'? Well, we won't. That was the master control for the ballast release switches and without it the ballast release is completely jinxed. And without releasing ballast we can never rise again. Here we are, Vyland, and here we stay. For ever."

The sweat poured down our faces in rivulets. The air was humid and now almost indescribably foul. Our hoarse rasping gasps as we fought for oxygen was the only sound in that tiny steel ball resting on the floor of the Gulf of Mexico.

"You jinxed it?" Vyland's voice was a weak incredulous whisper, his eyes near crazed with fear. "We're—we're stuck here? Here, in this—" His voice faded away as he turned his head and started looking around with all the terror-stricken desperation of a cornered rat about to die. Which was all he was.

"There's no way out, Vyland," I assured him grimly. "Only through that entrance hatch. Maybe you want to try opening it?—at this depth there can only be a pressure of fifty tons or so on the outside of it. And if you could open it—well, you'd be flattened half an inch thick against the opposite bulkhead . . ."

"Stop it, stop it!" Vyland screamed. "Get us out of here,

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Talbot, get us out! I'll give you anything you like, one million, two millions, five millions. You can have it all, Talbot, you can have it all!" His mouth and face worked like a maniac's.

"I wouldn't get you out if I could, Vyland. And it was just in case I might be tempted that I left the control switch up in the rig. We've got fifteen, maybe twenty minutes to live, if you can call the screaming agony we'll know living. Or rather, the agony you'll know." I put my hand to my coat, ripped off the central button, and thrust it into my mouth. "I won't know a thing. That's no button, Vyland, it's a concentrated cyanide capsule. One bite on that and I'll be dead before I know I'm dying."

That got him. Dribbling from a corner of his mouth and babbling incoherently, he flung himself on me, with what purpose in mind I don't know. He was too crazed to know himself. But I had been expecting it; a spanner lay to hand and I swung it. He reeled backwards and collapsed heavily on the floor.

That left Royale. He was half sitting, half crouched on his little canvas stool; his sphinx-like control had completely snapped; he knew he had only minutes to live. He saw closing in on himself what he had meted out to so many victims over so long a time and the talons of fear were squeezing deep, reaching for the innermost corners of his mind. All he could think of to do was what he always thought of in an emergency and that was to use his deadly little black gun. He had it out now and it was pointing at me, but I knew it meant nothing. He had no intention of using it. For the first time Royale had met a problem that couldn't be solved by a squeeze of the trigger finger.

"You're scared, Royale, aren't you?" I said softly. It was an effort even to speak.

He said nothing, just looked at me, and all the devils in hell were in the depths of those black eyes.

"Royale," I whispered huskily, "Royale the killer. You're terrified as you've never been terrified in your life."

Again he said nothing. The devils were still in his eyes, but they weren't watching me any more, they were riding hard on Royale, they were digging deep into the dark recesses of that dark mind, the shift and play of expression on his contorted face was evidence enough that they were pulling him every way, but the overall pull was towards the dark precipice of complete breakdown, of that overmastering fear that wears the cloak of insanity.

"Damn you to hell, Talbot!" His voice was halfway between a sob and a scream. "You're going to die!" The shaking gun was lined up on my heart.

"I'm laughing. I'm laughing out loud. I've got a cyanide tablet between my teeth." My chest was hurting, and I knew I couldn't last out much longer. "Go ahead," I gasped. "Go ahead and pull the trigger."

He looked at me with crazy unfocused eyes that had hardly any contact left with reality and fumbled the little black gun back into its holster. The beating he'd taken over his head was beginning

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to take its toll. He began to sway in his seat, and suddenly fell forward on to his hands and knees.

I leaned across him, barely conscious myself, closed my fingers over the control knob of the carbon dioxide absorption unit and turned it from minimum all the way up to maximum. It would take two minutes, perhaps three, before there would be any noticeable improvement.

Right then, it made no difference at all. I bent over Royale. "You're dying, Royale," I gasped out. "How does it feel to die? Tell me, how does it feel? How does it feel to be buried in a tomb five hundred feet beneath the surface of the sea? How does it feel to know that you'll never breathe that wonderful, clean, fresh air of the world above again, how does it feel to know that you'll never see the sun again, how does it feel to die?" I bent closer to him. "Tell me, Royale, how would you like to live? How would you like to live, Royale?" I almost had to shout the words.

"I want to live." His voice was a harsh moan of pain.

"Maybe I can give you life yet. Maybe. You're down on your hands and knees, aren't you, Royale? You're begging for your life. I've sworn I'd see the day when you were on your hands and knees begging for your life and now you're doing just that, aren't you, Royale?"

"Damn you, Talbot!" His voice was a hoarse despairing agonised shout; he was swaying on his hands and knees now, his head turning from side to side, his eyes screwed shut. He was breathing with the rapidity of a panting dog. "Get me out of here! For God's sake, get me out of here."

"You're not dead yet, Royale," I said in his ear. "Maybe you will see the sun again. But maybe you won't. I lied to Vyland, Royale. The master switch for the ballast release is still in position —I just altered a couple of wires, that's all. It would take you hours to find out which two. I could fix it in thirty seconds."

He stopped swaying his head, looked up at me with a blue-tinged sweat-sheened face, with bloodshot fear-darkened eyes that carried far back in them the faintest flicker of hope. "Get me out of here, Talbot," he whispered.

"I could do it, Royale, couldn't I? See, I've got the screwdriver right here. But I've still got this cyanide tablet in my mouth, Royale."

"You're mad, Talbot, mad! You're not human." Coming from Royale that was good.

"Who killed Jablonsky?" I asked quietly.

"I did. I killed him. I shot him," Royale moaned.

"And then?"

"We buried him in the kitchen garden." Royale was still moaning and swaying. He was talking for his life and he knew it.

"Who's behind Vyland?"

"Nobody."

"Who's behind Vyland?" I repeated implacably.

"Nobody." His voice was almost a scream, he was so desperate

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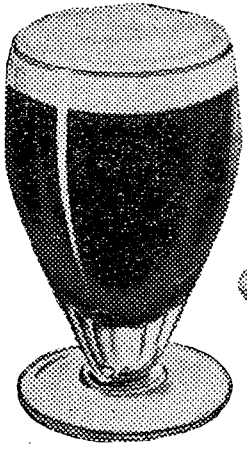

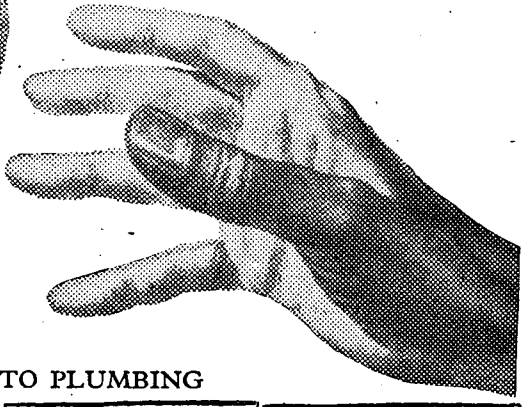

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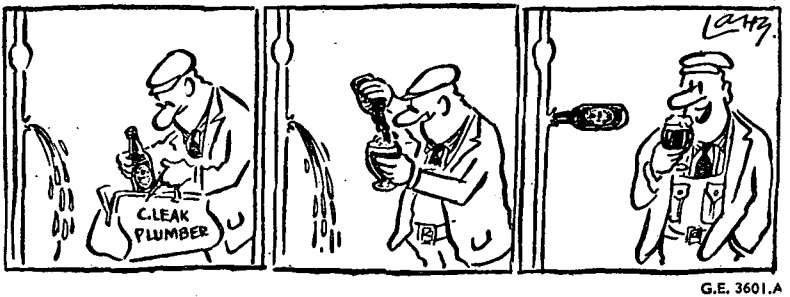

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to convince me. "There were two men, a minister in the government, and Houras, a permanent civil servant. But not now."

"What happened to them?"

"They were—they were eliminated," Royale said wearily. "I did it."

"Who else did you eliminate, working for Vyland?"

"Nobody."

I showed him the button between my teeth and he shuddered. "The pilot. The pilot flying the fighter that shot down this plane. He—he knew too much."

"That's why we could never find that pilot," I nodded. "My God, you're a sweet bunch. But you made a mistake, Royale, didn't you? You shot him too soon. Before he'd told you exactly where the DC had crashed . . . Vyland gave you orders for all this?" He nodded.

"Did you hear my question?" I demanded.

"Vyland gave me orders for all of that."

There was a brief silence. I turned and tapped Royale on the shoulder. "Vyland," I said. "Try to bring him round."

While Royale stooped over his employer I reached above him for the oxygen regenerating switch. I didn't want the air getting too fresh too soon.

After maybe a minute or so Royale managed to bring Vyland to.

I crossed to Vyland, caught him by the lapel with my good hand, and dragged him close. "There's maybe five minutes' air left, Vyland. Perhaps less. Just tell me, and tell me quickly, the part you played in this business. Hurry it up!"

"Get us out of here," he moaned. "There's no air, no air! I can't—I can't breathe." He was hardly exaggerating at that, the foul air was rasping in and out his throat with the frequency of a normal heartbeat.

"Talk, damn you, talk!" Royale gripped his shoulders. "Talk, Vyland! Do you think I want to die because of you?"

Vyland talked. In less than three gasping, coughing, choking minutes he'd told me all I ever wanted to know—how he'd struck a deal with a minister and had a plane standing by for weeks, how he had suborned the officer in charge of a radar tracking station in Western Cuba, how the plane had been tracked, intercepted, and shot down, and how he had had Royale dispose of those who had served his purposes. He started to talk of the general, but I held up my hand.

"O.K., that'll do, Vyland. Get back to your seat." I reached for the carbon dioxide switch and turned it up to maximum.

"What's that you're doing?" Vyland whispered.

"Bringing a little fresh air into the place. Getting rather stuffy down here, don't you think?"

They stared at each other, then at me, but remained silent. Fear was still the single predominating emotion in their minds: and they knew that they were still completely at my mercy.

"Who—who are you, Talbot?" Vyland croaked.

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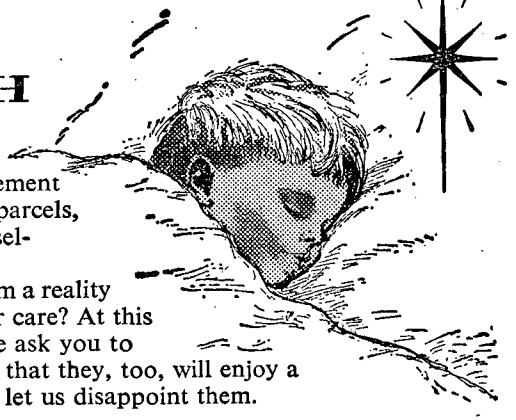

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"I suppose you might call me a cop." I sat down on a canvas chair, I didn't want to start the delicate job of taking the bathyscaphe up till the air—and my mind—was completely clear. "I used to be a bona fide salvage man, working with my brother. The man—or what's left of the man—out there in the captain's seat, Vyland. We were a good team, we struck gold off the Tunisian coast and used the capital to start our own airline—we were both wartime bomber pilots, we both had civilian licences. We were doing very well, Vyland—until we met you.

"After you'd done this—" I jerked a thumb in the direction of the broken plane—"I went back to London. I was arrested, they thought I'd something to do with this. I didn't take long to clear that up and have Lloyd's of London take me over as a special investigator. They were willing to spend an unlimited sum to get even a percentage of their money back. And because state money was involved both the British and American governments were behind me. Solidly behind me. Nobody ever had a better backing; the Americans even went the length of assigning a topflight cop wholetime to the job. The cop was Jablonsky."

That jolted them, badly. They had lost sufficient of their immediate terror of death, had come far enough back into the world of reality to appreciate what I was saying, and what that meant.

"That was a mistake, wasn't it, gentlemen?" I went on. "Shooting Jablonsky. Judges don't like people who murder cops."

I told them how Jablonsky and I had spent well over a year, mostly in Cuba, looking for traces of the bullion; how we had come to the conclusion that it still hadn't been recovered—not one of the cut emeralds had appeared anywhere in the world's markets. Interpol would have known in days.

"And we were pretty certain," I continued, "*why* the money hadn't been recovered. It had been lost in the sea and someone had been a mite hasty in killing off the only person who knew exactly where it was—the pilot of the fighter plane.

"Our inquiries had narrowed down to the west coast of Florida. Somebody was looking for money sunk in the water. For that they needed a ship. The general's *Temptress* did just fine. But for that you also needed an extremely sensitive depth recorder, and there is where you made your one and fatal mistake, Vyland. We had requested every major marine equipment supplier in Europe and North America to notify us immediately they sold any special depth-finding equipment to any vessels other than naval, mercantile, or fishing. You are following me, I trust?"

They were following me, all right. They were three parts back to normal now and there was murder in their eyes.

"In the four-month period concerned, no fewer than six of those ultra-sensitive recorders had been sold privately. All to owners of very large yachts. Two of those yachts were on a world cruise. One was in Rio, one was in Long Island Sound, one on the Pacific coast—and the sixth was plodding up and down the west coast of Florida. General Blair Ruthven's *Temptress*.

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"It was brilliant. I admit it. What better cover could you ever have had for quartering every square yard of sea off the Florida coast without arousing suspicion? While the general's geologists were busy making seismological maps of the undersea rock strata, you were busy mapping every tiniest contour of the ocean floor with the depth recorder.

"It took you almost six weeks, because you started operating too far to the north—we were watching your every move even then. Well, you found the plane. You even spent three nights dragging for it with grapples but all you could drag up was a small section of the left wingtip."

"How do you know all this?" Vyland whispered.

"Because I had secured a job as a replacement engineer aboard the *Temptress*." I ignored the startled oath, the involuntary clenching of Vyland's hands. "You and the general thought you had seen me aboard that Havana salvage vessel, but you hadn't, though I'd been with the firm. I was five weeks on the *Temptress* and it wasn't till I left that I dyed my hair this hellish colour, had a plastic surgeon fix up this scar, and affected a limp. Even so, you weren't very observant, were you, Vyland?

"So there you were. You knew where the treasure was, but you couldn't get your hands on it—anyone who started using diving bells and all the complicated recovery gear necessary for a job like this would have been putting a noose round his own neck. But then someone had another brilliant idea—this one, I'd wager anything, came from the mind of our deceased engineer friend, Bryson. He'd read all about those bathyscaphe trials that were being carried out in the West Indies and came up with the idea of using it in conjunction with this rig."

The air was almost back to normal inside the observation chamber and breathing was no longer any problem. Royale and Vyland were getting their meanness and courage back with the passing of every moment.

"So, you see, everyone was having brilliant ideas," I continued. "But the real beauty, the one that's brought you two to the end of the road, was Jablonsky's. It was Jablonsky who thought that it would be real kind and helpful of us if we could provide a bathyscaphe for you to do the job."

Vyland swore, softly and vilely, looked slowly at Royale then back to me. "You mean—" he began.

"It was all laid on," I said tiredly. I was taking no pleasure in any of this. "The French and British navies were carrying out tests with it in the Gulf of Lyons, but they readily agreed to continue those tests out here. We made sure that it got terrific publicity, that not even the biggest moron could fail to understand how good the bathyscaphe was for stealthy underwater salvage and recovery of buried treasure.

"We knew it would be only a matter of time before the *Temptress* turned up, and she did. So we left it in a nice lonely place. But before we left it I jinxed it so thoroughly that no one apart from the

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electrician who'd wired it in the first place and myself could ever have got it going again.

"You had to have someone to unjinx it, didn't you, Vyland? Wasn't it a fortunate coincidence that I happened to turn up? Incidentally, I wonder what our friends the field foreman and petroleum engineer are going to say when they find out that they've spent the better part of three months drilling a couple of miles away from where the geologists told them to: I suppose it was you and Bryson who altered the reference navigation marks on the charts to bring you within shouting distance of the treasure and miles away from where the oil strata lie."

They could have killed me there and then. Nobody had ever talked like this to them before, and they had just no idea what to say, what to do about it: for their lives were still in my hands. Then, after a long moment, Vyland leaned back and smiled. His mind was working again.

"I suppose, Talbot, that you were entertaining some idea of turning us over to the authorities. Is that it?" He waited for a reply, but when none came he went on, "If you were, I'd change your mind about it. For such a clever cop, Talbot, you've been very blind in one spot. You wouldn't want to be responsible for the deaths of two innocent people, would you now, Talbot?"

"What are you talking about?" I asked slowly.

"I'm talking about the general." Vyland flicked a glance at Royale, a glance for the first time empty of fear, a look of triumph. "General Blair-Ruthven, his wife, and his younger daughter."

"What's the general's wife got to do—"

The relief in Vyland's face was an almost tangible quality. "You fool, Talbot, you blind fool! The general—did it never occur to you to wonder *why* a man like that would let us use his yacht, his rig and anything else we wanted? Didn't it, Talbot?"

"Well, I thought—"

"You thought," he sneered. "You poor fool, old Ruthven had to help us whether he wanted to or not. He helped us because he knew the lives of his wife and young daughter depended on us."

"His wife and young daughter? But—but they've had a legal separation, haven't they—the general and his wife, I mean. I read all about it—"

"Sure you read all about it. It would have been just too bad if the story hadn't got around. They're hostages, Talbot. We kidnapped them. We've got them in a place of safety where they'll stay till we've finished here. Or else."

"A federal and capital offence, kidnapping. You freely and openly admit it?"

"Yes," Vyland said.

"The general's wife and daughter," I mused. "It wasn't a bad idea. You'd have let them go in the end, you couldn't afford not to. On the other hand you knew the general wouldn't start anything afterwards: it would only be his word against yours, and up your sleeve you always carried the trump card—Royale. As long

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as Royale walked the face of America the general would never speak."

"Correct. I hold the trumps, Talbot."

"Yes," I said absently. "And every day, just on noon, you sent a coded telegram—in the general's company code—to your watch-dogs who kept an eye on Mrs. Ruthven and Jean. You see, Vyland, I even know the daughter's name. And if the coded telegram didn't arrive in twenty-four hours they had instructions to shift them to another place, a safer hideout. Atlanta wasn't too safe, I'm afraid."

Vyland's face was grey, his hands beginning to shake again. His voice came as a strained whisper. "What are you saying?"

"I only caught on twenty-four hours ago," I replied. "We'd been blind—we'd been checking every outgoing cable from Marble Springs for weeks, but forgot all about the inland telegrams. When I did catch on, a message to Judge Mollison from me—through Kennerley, remember that fight we had? I slipped it to him then—started off what must have been the most concentrated manhunt for years. Mrs. Ruthven and Jean are safe—your friends, Vyland, are under lock and key and talking their heads off to beat the rap." This last bit was guesswork, but not far out, I thought.

"You're making this up," Vyland said huskily. Fear was back in his face. "You've been under guard all day and—"

"If you were up in the radio shack and could see the state of that creature of yours who tried to stop me from putting through a radio call to the sheriff, you wouldn't say that. It was Kennerley who gave Royale here his sore head. It was Kennerley who dragged him inside the room and kept on making those calculations on the papers on my desk while I went up to attend to things. You see, I didn't dare move till they were free. But they are free."

I looked at the grey and stricken and hunted face and looked away again. The time had come to get back. I had found out all I wanted to know, got all the evidence I would ever want.

I opened up a circuit box, unbuttoned and repositioned four wires, closed the box again, and pulled the first of the four electro-magnetic releases for the lead shot ballast.

It worked. Two clouds of grey pellets showered mistily by the side observation windows and disappeared into the black mud on the sea bed. It worked, but the lightening of the weight made no difference; the bathyscaphe didn't budge.

I pulled the second switch, emptied the second pair of containers: still we remained immovable. We were sunk pretty deep into that mud, how deep I didn't know, but this had never happened before on tests. I sat down to work out if there was any factor I had forgotten. Now that the strain was over the pain was back in my shoulder. I wasn't thinking so well any more. I removed the button from between my teeth and placed it in a pocket.

"Was—was that cyanide?" Vyland's face was still grey.

"Don't be silly. Antler horn, best quality." I rose, pulled the other two switches simultaneously. They worked—but again nothing happened.

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I looked at Vyland and Royale, and saw reflected in their faces the fear that was beginning to touch my own mind.

I started up both motors, inclined the planes to the maximum upward elevation, started up the tow-rope motor, and at the same moment pressed the switch that jettisoned the two big electric batteries mounted on the outside of the scaphe. They fell simultaneously with a thud that jarred the bathyscaphe, sending up a dark spreading cloud of black viscous-looking mud.

For two moments of eternity nothing happened, the bolt was shot, the last hope was gone, when, all in a second, the scaphe trembled, broke suction aft, and started to rise. I heard Vyland sobbing with relief and terror.

I switched off the engines and we rose steadily, smoothly, on an even keel, now and again starting the tow-rope motor to take in some slack. We were about a hundred feet up when Royale spoke.

"So it was all a plant. You never had any intention of keeping us down there." His voice was an evil whisper. "Why, Talbot?"

"To find out exactly where the treasure was. But that was really secondary. I knew it wasn't far away."

"Why, Talbot?" he repeated in the same monotone.

"Because I had to have evidence. I had to have evidence to send you both to the chair. Up till now we had no evidence whatsoever; all along the way your back trail was divided into a series of watertight compartments with locked doors. Royale locked the doors by killing everybody and anybody who might talk. Incredibly, there wasn't a single solitary thing we could pin on you, there wasn't a person who could split on you. The locked doors. But you opened them all today. Fear was the key to all the doors."

"You've got no evidence, Talbot," Royale said. "It's only your word against ours—and you won't live to give your word."

"I expected something like that." I nodded. "Getting your courage back, Royale, aren't you? But you can't get this scaphe back to the rig without me, and you know it. Besides, I have some concrete evidence. Taped under my toes is the bullet that killed Jablonsky." They exchanged quick startled looks. "That bullet will match up with your automatic, Royale. That alone would send you to the chair."

"Give it to me, Talbot. Give it to me now." The flat marbled eyes were glistening, his hand sliding for his gun.

"Don't be stupid. What are you going to do with it—throw it out of the window? You can't get rid of it, you know it. And even if you could, there's something else that you can never get rid of. The real reason for our trip today, the reason that means you both die."

There was something in my tone that got them. Royale was very still, Vyland grey and shaking. They knew, without knowing why, the end had come.

"The tow-rope," I said. "The wire with the microphone cable leading back to the speaker in the rig. You see the microphone

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switch here, you see it's at 'Off'? I fixed it this afternoon so that the microphone was always live. That's why I made you speak up, made you repeat most things, that's why I dragged you, Vyland, close up to me so that you were right against the mike. Every word that's been spoken down here today, every word we're speaking now is going through live to that speaker. And every word is being taken down three times: by a tape-recorder, by a civil stenographer, and by a police stenographer from Miami.

"I phoned the police on the way back from the rig this morning. And at lunchtime, Vyland, I told Kennerley your secret knock. Cibatti and his men will have fallen for it, they were bound to. It's all over now.

"And don't worry about the tape-recording," I went on. "They're not normally acceptable as court evidence, but those will be. Every statement you made was volunteered by yourselves, and there'll be at least ten witnesses inside the caisson who will swear that they could not have come from any source other than the bathyscaphe. Any prosecutor in the Union will call for and get a verdict of guilty."

"So!" Royale had his gun out, he must have had some crazy notion of trying to snap the tow-rope and sailing the scaphe off to safety. "So we were all wrong about you, Talbot, so you were smarter than we were. All right, I admit it—but you'll never live to hear the jury give their verdict." His trigger finger began to tighten.

"Look down the barrel," I advised him. "If you want to blow your hand off, you know what to do. When you were unconscious this evening Kennerley used a hammer and punch to jam a lead cylinder right down the barrel. Do you think I'd be so crazy as to come down here and you with a loaded gun in your hand? Don't take my word for it, Royale—just pull the trigger." He squinted down the barrel and his face twisted into a malevolent mask of hate. I knew that gun was coming before he did. I managed to dodge; the gun fell harmlessly to the floor.

"No one tampered with my gun," Vyland said hoarsely. He was almost unrecognisable as the smooth, urbane, slightly florid top executive he'd been, his face was haggard now, curiously aged and covered in a greyish sheen of sweat. "Made a mistake at last, haven't you, Talbot?" His breath was coming in brief shallow gasps. "You're not going—"

He broke off, hand halfway inside his coat, and stared down into the muzzle of the heavy Colt pointing between his eyes.

"Where—where did you get that? It's—it's Larry's gun."

"Was. You should have searched me, shouldn't you?—not Kennerley. Fools. Sure, it's Larry's gun—that dope-headed junky who claimed he was your son." I looked steadily at him, I didn't want any gunfire a hundred and fifty feet below sea level; I didn't know what might happen. "I took it off him this evening, Vyland, just about an hour ago. Just before I killed him."

With something between a sob and a moan Vyland flung himself

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at me across the width of the chamber. But his reactions were slow, his movements even slower, and he collapsed soundlessly to the floor as the barrel of Larry's Colt caught him across the temple.

"Tie him up," I said to Royale. There was plenty of spare flex lying around and Royale wasn't fool enough to get tough about it. He tied him up, while I was blowing fuel through a valve and slowing our ascent, and just as he finished and before he could straighten I let him have it behind the ear with the butt of the Colt. If ever there had been a time for playing it like a gentleman, that time was long gone. I was now so weak, so lost in that flooding sea of pain, that I knew it would be impossible for me to bring that scaphe back to the rig and watch Royale at the same time. I doubted whether I could even make it at all.

I made it, but only just. I remember easing the hatch of the bathyscaphe up inside the caisson, asking through the mike, in a slurred stumbling voice that wasn't mine, for the annular rubber ring to be inflated, and then lurching across to twist open the handle of the entrance door. I don't remember any more. I am told they found all three of us lying unconscious on the floor of the bathyscaphe.

I walked down the courthouse steps out into the still warm October sunshine. They'd just sentenced Royale to death and everybody knew there would be no appeal, no reversal of the decision. The jury, as I had prophesied, had convicted without leaving the box. The trial had lasted only one day and during that entire day Royale had sat as though carved from stone, his eyes fixed on the same spot for hour after interminable hour. That spot had been me.

Those blank flat marbled eyes had been as expressionless as ever, they hadn't even altered a fraction when the prosecution had played the recording of Royale begging for his life on his hands and knees in the scaphe at the bottom of the sea, they hadn't altered when the death sentence had come, but for all the lack of expression a blind man could have read his message. "Eternity's a long time, Talbot," his eyes had said. "Eternity is for ever. But I'll be waiting."

Let him wait: eternity was too long for me to worry about.

They hadn't sentenced Vyland, for they never even had the chance to try him. On the way back up the caisson from the bathyscaphe, a hundred and seventy steps from the bottom, Vyland simply let go his grip on the ladder and leaned back into space: he hadn't even screamed on the long way down.

I passed the general and his wife on the steps. I had met Mrs. Ruthven on my first day out of hospital, which had been yesterday. She had been very charming and gracious and endlessly grateful. They had offered me everything, from a job at the top of the tree in Ruthven's oil companies to enough money to last any man half a

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dozen lifetimes, but I'd just smiled and thanked them and turned them all down. There was nothing in them for me, all the fancy directorships and money in the world couldn't buy me back the days that were gone. And money couldn't buy the only thing I wanted out of the world today.

Mary Ruthven was standing beside her father's sand and beige Rolls-Royce. She was dressed in a plain white, simple one-piece dress that couldn't have cost more than a thousand bucks, her wheat-coloured hair was piled high on her head, and I had never seen her looking so lovely. Behind her was Kennerley. For the first time I saw him dressed in a lounge suit, dark blue and immaculately cut, and when you saw him like that it was impossible to imagine him any other way.

His chauffeuring days were over: the general knew how much the Ruthven family owed him and you couldn't pay a debt like that with chauffeur's wages. I wished him all the luck in the world: he was a nice guy.

I halted at the foot of the steps.

Mary saw me, hesitated a moment, then came across to where I was standing. Her eyes seemed dark and curiously blurred but maybe I was imagining it. She murmured something, I couldn't make out what it was, then suddenly, careful not to hurt my left arm still in its sling, she put her two arms round my neck, pulled down my head and kissed me.

Next moment she was gone, making her way back to the Rolls like a person who couldn't see too well. Kennerley looked at her coming towards him, then lifted his eyes to mine, his face still and empty of all expression.

I smiled at him and he smiled back. A nice guy.

I walked down the street, along towards the shore.

An hour, two hours, I don't know how long I sat there. The sun sank down close to the rim of the ocean, the sea and the sky turned to orange and gold, and I could see, faintly on the horizon and weirdly silhouetted against this flaming backdrop, the massively grotesque angularity of the oil-rig X 13.

X.13. I supposed that would always be a part of me now, that and the broken-winged DC that lay to its south-west, buried under four hundred and eighty feet of water. For better or for worse, it would always be a part of me.

The sun was on the rim of the sea now and the western world a great red flame, a flame that would soon be extinguished and vanish as if it had never been. And so it had been with my red rose, before it had turned to white.

The sun was gone and the night rushed across the sea. With the dark came the cold so I rose stiffly to my feet and walked back to the hotel.

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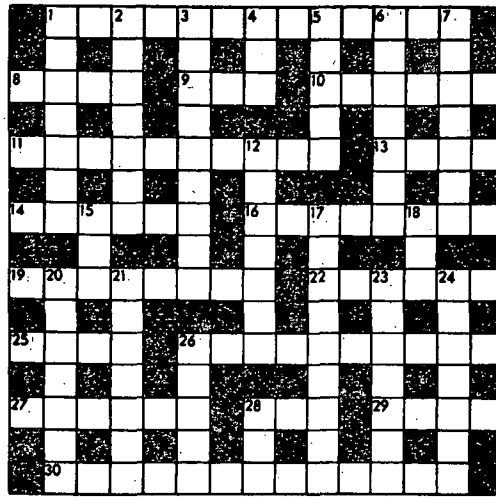

ACROSS

1 Rural policemen? No, kitchen gadgets! (6, 7).

8 Adolf Hitler, for instance (4).

9 Pace at which I leave the ruin (3).

10 Capt. Kidd's speciality (6).

11 Lady be good ? Not this one! (10).

13 It's a square in three directions (4).

14 Stop—a crook's career, maybe (6).

16 Proper young madam. Well, hardly proper (8).

19 Tying a knot's one (8).

22 Outsize quarry for this bird (6).

25 Vile mix-up (4).

26 Amnesia victim—or selfish beast ? (4-6).

27 Injure cheats (6).

28 Palindromic parent (3).

29 Either Castor or Pollux (4).

30 Not Bisley aces. These are heavenly (8, 5).

DOWN

1 Peasant with a pheasant (7).

2 Donkey's delight (7).

3 Turn the steak in S.W. Asia (9).

4 Nip up to the flag on the green (3).

5 You might get twopence on it (5).

6 Eavesdropper's complaint ? (7).

7 Large bag but makes wind instrument (7).

12 American soldier in the local. That seems sensible! (7).

15 English resort for Scotch (3).

17 Cromwell's confederates (9).

18 Hill on Dartmoor. Letters found scattered there too (3).

20 No sins ? They're only beginners (7).

21 Two blacks won't make this (7).

23 Handy for plucking —but not birds (7).

24 They're agin us ! (7).

26 Metal or lightning (5).

28 Mr. Chaney leaves London (3).

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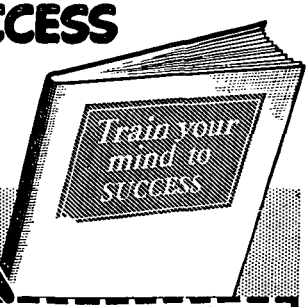

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